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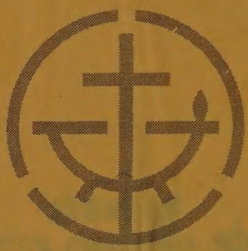

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LIFE ON GOD'S PLAN

LIFE ON GOD'S PLAN

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BY

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Religion 252 M158L

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IN AFFECTIONATE AND GRATEFUL MEMORY

OF SEVEN HAPPY YEARS

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I

LIFE ON GOD'S PLAN

And Isaac builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants digged a well.—Genesis xxvi. 25.

ISAAC is felt by every Bible-reader to be a much less commanding figure than the men who stand on either side of him—his father Abraham and his son Jacob. He had neither the lofty and daring faith of the one, nor the other's passionate instinct of adventure. His qualities were not such as stir the imagination of the world. Passive rather than intense, he spent one of those lives that are largely controlled and arranged by other people. The influence of his friends always tended to be too strong for him; so it was, for example, when the wife he was to marry was selected by his father, and brought home to him by deputy. Hence we are apt to call him tame, torpid, slow; at all events the too easy victim of over-modesty and inertia.

But of course such a character has another side. Isaac, it is true, is unlike Abraham and Jacob; but it is they that are uncommon men, not he. Of the

three he exhibits far the closest resemblance to average humanity. You will find a score of Isaacs for every Abraham that emerges. And just for that reason the fact that Isaac was given his place in this great patriarchal succession speaks to us of the truth that God is the God of ordinary people, not less than of those in whom there sleeps the divine spark of genius or greatness. As some one has said, "God has a place for the quiet man". We may have neither distinguished talents nor a distinguished history, but one thing we can do—we can form a link in the chain by which the Divine blessing goes down from one generation to another.

So that my text has all the more significance that Isaac stands near the ordinary level of men and women. If we do not feel ourselves to be of any exceptional or romantic type, no more was he. Hence I think that within the four corners of this verse, which sets forth the experience of one in all points like ourselves, we may find an indication of the Divinely willed elements in a complete life. "Isaac builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants digged a well." Pick out the three centres here, where the threads cross, and they are these, the *altar*, the *tent*, the *well*. There we see focussed sharply, and gathered up, the main constituents or impulses which are always to be found in the life of a man

after God's own heart; and without being unduly imaginative or fantastic, we may decide that they stand for *religion*, *home* and *work*.

First, then, *religion*. "He builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord." In the history of the patriarchs this brief notice of the erection of an altar is almost a standing formula. It recurs over and over again in the story of Abraham. Always the same conjunction—the altar, with the tent close at hand. The Pilgrim Fathers, when they stepped on the savage shores of the New World, provided first for the house of God, it is related, before lavishing expense or solicitude on their own homes; and in this they had the far-off saints of Genesis for model.

Here, then, is seen clearly the first or basal element in a complete existence—religion, worship, reverence, faith. Isaac got his religion from his father, and now and then, perhaps, the question may arise whether, if he had had to make a venture like Abraham's for his belief, it might not have gone hard with him. Perhaps it might; but God gives to every man his own task. All are not pioneers, like Columbus; and if to us grace comes, as well it may, like an heirloom, almost, of the family, then our reasons for gratitude are all the deeper, and in the fact we should feel a sharp spur inciting us to guard with double care the treasure that is passing through our

hands. It is a trust for generations yet unborn; let us be faithful, therefore, and let us remember so to live that when our day is over, and we lay down the trust, its beauty and preciousness may not have diminished in our keeping.

We see, then, that the first thing to be done by these early believers, on reaching a new home, however temporary, was to build an altar; and that act had a very distinct meaning. Remember, they were living under the promise of God that one day Canaan would be theirs; and the erection of these rude shrines was just one way of taking the country in possession. Perhaps the altar might be reared, here or there, on the very spot which heathen natives had kept as a place of sacrifice; under the branches, for example, of some sacred tree which had looked down on the cruel and impure rites of many generations. There Isaac would build his altar—the first step in that long process of cleansing and appropriation of the soil which ultimately turned Canaan into a Holy Land for God's ransomed people. Friends, this thing is a parable. Life needs altars, if it is to be cleansed, and set apart, and made fit for the Divine service and indwelling. That is true about all life, be it social or individual. Quench the altar-flame in a city or a country; put out the fire of faith and devotion; destroy the influence of religion, and in twenty years society will fall to pieces by its own rottenness. Jesus called His people

the salt of the earth—why? Because without them the world would be a mass of moral putrefaction. As Russell Lowell remarked, when some one had been talking cheap scepticism in his hearing: "Show me ten square miles in any part of the world, outside of Christianity, where the life of man and the honour of woman are safe, and I can bring up my children decently, and I will emigrate there and give up religion". No; human life, much like the waste land scattered on the fringe of cultivation, has to be reclaimed for God, and wheresoever the power of religion has died out, there social existence sinks back to its old level, and speedily the vicious weeds and poisonous growths of paganism are once more waving over it.

This holds good still more obviously of the life of the individual. Apart from the fact—though it is a fact easily forgotten—that God *demands* faith and obedience from every man; apart from this, I say, the life with no religion in it is a poor, stunted, undeveloped thing. Not to know God, not to love and trust Jesus Christ, is like breathing all your days with one lung. We only begin to taste what life can be when we have looked up, far beyond and above ourselves, in humble desire and honest self-surrender. Without that, we may widen our experience by art or culture as we please, but to the end it will be a thing of irretrievably narrow limits, for it will lack

the third dimension, which gives depth and height. Besides, as you know who have seen the underside of life's web, the man without faith, whose altar has never yet been built or kindled, is choosing to dwell unprotected amid pestilences and miasmas of moral evil, the germs of which hide festering in every corner of the world we live in. So, I pray you, take possession of your life, in the name of God; or the forces of sin and worldliness will desecrate it for ever. Set up the altar of trust and worship, and by that act stamp your existence as belonging to the Highest. Here and now you can mark and seal your present and your future with a consecration that will proclaim it Christ's to the very end of time. The smoke that rises from the kindled pile will declare whose you are and whom you serve.

At this point let me urge a very simple lesson. It is noteworthy that wherever Isaac had a tent he saw to it that God had an altar. In other words, we should take religion with us wherever we go. On our holidays, for example, and on our journeys, when they lead us far from home, and the bonds of custom and neighbourly observation are relaxed. The piety that evaporates when a man gets fifty miles from his own parish is a worthless thing. So let us take religion with us just as carefully as we do our purse when we go from home, and plant the altar firmly where we pitch the tent. Doubtless the en-

vironment will be hostile sometimes; but what is religion for, if it is to quench its flame meekly at the faintest breeze of opposition? Isaac must have found himself, often, among Canaanites and Philistines to whom his altars and prayers were an object of detestation; yet, easy though we think him, he could be stiff enough when it was a question of serving the Lord God of his fathers. And equally, you and I have to keep faith with our Maker and Redeemer be our lot cast where it may.

The second element in our life, as God plans it, is *home*. "Isaac pitched his tent there." His *tent*—an emblem, surely, of the changeful existence man is called to lead. Ever since Eden he has been a-wandering; sin has sunk the magic poison of restlessness in his blood. The very symbol of salvation is rest; the last blessedness of the redeemed is peace: "he that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide—shall *abide*—under the shadow of the Almighty". We are all represented by this man, as he moves to and fro, dwelling under his frail and flimsy structure of dark camel's hair, sheltering in a house without foundations, a mere shed of canvas that can be pitched and struck again in a brief hour.

Now this transiency of mortal things is one aspect of the truth, needful to be thought upon and never quite forgotten without loss. It is unspeakably im-

portant that we Christians should cultivate a detached spirit in regard to things seen; enjoying the good gifts of God—yes! enjoying them, and thanking Him for them all—but not afraid, not panic-stricken, at the thought of letting go. If, as Robert Barbour used to say, "Like the Jacobites, our King too is over the water," our home cannot be here; and the tent-life, if we may call it so, is all that can be indulged in safely by those whose true country is beyond this horizon. That, surely, is at least part of what the writer of Hebrews meant: "Abraham dwelt in tents . . . *because* he looked for the city that hath foundations".

This, I have said, is a great truth, and no man can be a worthy Christian who does not in some degree feel its power; yet it is only one aspect of the whole fact. Doubtless the tent was frail and transitory, yet all the time it was a home. Round that little shed of canvas clustered Isaac's dearest hopes. Thither Rebekah came; there his children were born. There he exercised the hospitality so dear to an Oriental heart, and sat in the evening light to dispense justice to his people. To him it was the focus of experience. So it cannot be that we should in any sense forget the priceless worth of home, merely because, like other sweet human things, it changes, and decays, and is for this world alone. Is not the Church itself, in one aspect, for this world only, and it may be the

Bible too? Yet they are all God's inestimable gifts; and it is as we use such divine elements in the life that now is, that we declare our fitness to live again.

Now there is one characteristic of this patriarchal home which is worth pondering, signalised as it is by this very fact that it was a tent; I mean its simplicity. No doubt this was part of life then. No man will accumulate fine pictures or costly furniture who, any time, and at a day's notice, may have to move twenty miles to fresh pasture-ground. True, we are no longer at that stage; nevertheless, there is nothing to which our generation needs to be recalled more loudly than simplicity in the home. And very specially in the formation of it. Men and women, it is certain, would be much less faint-hearted and reluctant to form new ties were they only to recognise the plain fact that luxury and happiness have nothing to do with each other. This is a principle to which Mr. Roosevelt felt called to give a place in one of his wise and fearless messages to Congress. And it is an ominous and pitiful thing when those whom God meant to be happy together deliberately put the claim of home and family out of their lives because, forsooth, they would have to begin life with a smaller income than their parents. If a tent in the field can be the abode of peace and honour, it is shame to speak with scorn of "love in a cottage". It is that kind of poor cynicism that takes the iron out of the blood,

and the courage from the heart. "There are people," says Landor, "who think they write and speak finely, merely because they have forgotten the language in which their fathers and mothers used to talk to them"; and just so men and women, ofttimes, may be found who have all but lost the secret of earthly happiness, because they have forgotten the simplicity with which their parents used to live.

But let us pass on from home-life as it is in itself to what is more distinctive of the life drawn for us here. Home in some shape is the possession of all; the mark of this home was its steadfast proximity to the symbol of religion. The two stood side by side, inseparable, correlative, moving together when they moved at all. You could not step to the tent-door, but there, a few yards away, the first object to catch the eye was the altar built of stone.

A moment past I spoke of the transience of "home," and all the ties wrapped up in that one deep word. A few ropes and pins loosened, and the tent sinks to the ground; a fierce gust some night, and it lies levelled by the hurricane. So it is with men, with the places of abode we mortals build and fill with love and happy peace. The loss of health, the progress of years, commercial adversity, the shame of sin,—ah! sometimes the floods of death, swiftly descending out of the mountains of God; any one of them all may sap the foundations in a moment, and lay the whole

in ruins. "So fast we flit; such shadows we are, and such shadows we pursue." Yet into this transitoriness there is one thing that can bring permanence and eternity, and that is union with God. The man of the tent is the prey of time, and passes; the man of the altar endures for ever. Religion has in it that which is superior to time. Long after the tent is gone and every trace departed, the altar stands, to show where the man of God has been. And in the same way, brethren, if only the sacred ties and dear associations of home are knit firm by prayer and faith, it will be proved that over them also time and death have no power, and that the best and holiest that is in them passes on with us, when we pass. The moving tent has its counterpoise in the abiding altar.

How, then, is that pervasion of home-life by the spirit of religion to be realised? Well, part of the answer stands before our eyes, tangible, visible, materially and substantially present. We speak of the family-altar, in a phrase that to-day is a metaphor; yet once on a time, as we see, it was no metaphor, but a description of real fact, of something that bore sensible witness to a steady faith in the unseen. How many of us are careful to keep that fire alight with its flame of daily worship? It is only a few years since Mr. Bayard, the American Ambassador, told our kinsfolk across the sea that he had seldom

been a guest in a house in Britain where the inmates did not gather regularly to the footstool of God. Could that be said of us? It is the true way to secure that tent and altar shall not be moved asunder. "Every man a priest in his own home" is the only right motto. You take a flower out of the conservatory, where it has grown in moist air; but when you set it in your room you place it in a glass of water, still to keep it moist and fresh. So, too, you bring from church, it may be, week by week, uplifting thoughts of God, eager vows of loyalty to Christ. Tell me, how shall you keep these fresh and strong unless you gather round them, there in the home where you live, conditions of prayer, of worship, of united faith and reverence, just such as those in which they had their birth?

Now let us look at the last point that is here—*work*. "There Isaac's servants digged a well." Of the detail that the well was dug by Isaac's servants, I say nothing; everything was done, in those days, by families or households. The servants, doubtless, had also pitched the tent and built the altar. The point rather is that now there emerges the third element in full, true life; for Isaac and his servants were great flock-masters, and the provision of water was one of the first duties of their calling.

I need not labour the point that work is beautifully symbolised by a well of water. True, it has often been

thought of as a curse; but this is merely to confuse toil with the pain that so often follows after it. The two, remember, are quite different things, some day to be separated once for all; for in that land, we read, "His servants shall serve Him," yet "sorrow and sighing shall flee away". But considered just as one of the threads which God's hand is weaving into the strand of life, is not work a pure blessing? Is it not, like Isaac's well, an ever-flowing source of power and refreshment? Does not the well feed both tent and altar? Indeed, to overestimate the value of sound honest work, alike for our relations to God and man, is quite impossible. The idle man, as a thousand voices tell us daily, is gambling with his family happiness and his children's character; for idleness is the most unfailing symptom, as well as the constant feeder, of that all-devouring selfishness against which no domestic welfare can stand. And it is a truism that the idler cannot serve God. He has nothing with which to serve. The means, to his sin and shame, are lacking. The altar means *sacrifice;* and for that he has no contrite heart, no energy of purpose, no money that has cost him anything. On the other hand, no element in all the Christian experience goes more directly to fit men for the high fellowship of God or the pure felicity of home than the strain, the discipline, the long education of worthy and honest toil.

So, brethren, let us learn here the steps by which men climb to true greatness, although their names may fade and perish on the earth. Religion, home, work—he who keeps faith with God in these three parts of life inherits true power and nobleness in the kingdom that abides. Mark the order Isaac followed, for it is the right one—God first, happiness second; the tent a slight thing of little intrinsic worth, the altar built of solid and enduring stone. Let this be the relation we also maintain between the two, and in the end God will give us according to our choice: when the earthly house of this tabernacle—this tent—is dissolved, a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

II

THE CHOICE OF MOSES

By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward.—Heb. xi. 24-26.

It is noticeable that the Old Testament heroes mentioned in this chapter are exhibited to us, not in the general tenor of their lives, but each at a single turning-point. The light is flashed always upon one moment in the story. The sacrifice of Abel, the obedient emigration of Abraham, even the impulsive act of a poor sunken woman of Jericho—these isolated things are lifted into bold relief. What does this mean? Do we have in this chapter merely a splendid roll of the great men of old, with a typical instance of the power of faith culled from their varied experience? We have that certainly, but also we have more. Their action in each case was not only typical; it was decisive. What is moving as an undercurrent in the writer's mind is the conviction

that those believers of the ancient Church cast themselves on God in some one crisis of their life, and this established the connection for ever. The day they touched and held fast to God's offered faithfulness and mercy was a day of unending promise, and all their lives after the promise was but working itself out.

So, it has been said, if a man really trusts God for one thing, he will be led on to more. He will be drawn by an ever-deepening thirst to richer wells of water. In the days of His flesh Jesus Christ blessed many for their body first of all, and of that the last issue was the redemption of the soul. To-day a similar process is happening daily. Jesus' saviourship has many aspects, His healing power many sides; and if a man accept Him truly in one, he will accept Him finally in all. None of us, to begin with, can seize more than a narrow segment of truth's circle, but at last, if we endure faithfully, it will round into the perfect orb. So let us thank God and take courage if we ourselves have, or see in any other, a firm trust in any phase of Christ's redeemership, whether as Prophet, Priest or King. It is partial now, but one day it will expand into that full apprehension of His grace which quiets all misgivings and satisfies all desires.

Here, then, one moment in the life of Moses, like the rest, is lifted into the light. We are made to see

the crisis at which he decisively flung himself on God's side, so fixing the destinies of life. Soon or late such a man as he *must* confront the choice. Perhaps, viewing his situation from the outside, we might declare no one so unlikely to be confronted with a crucial decision. Egypt at that day boasted of an advanced civilisation, and all its luxury, all its culture, were poured into his cup. He had been trained, they say, in the most famous college in the land, and had proved himself already a statesman and a soldier. His foot was on the step of the loftiest throne on earth; in the judgment of his peers there lay open before him a career of the most enviable brilliance. It seemed as if one success had but to follow another. To-morrow would be as yesterday, and much more abundant.

And then came *God*—God, who had a plan of loving wisdom for this man, and was but biding His time. For after all Moses had been deeply unsatisfied with the easy splendour that gleamed and shimmered round him. His life at court had failed to make him an Egyptian noble; attachment to his own people was still unquenched. How could he then forget that his parents were only slaves? And so it became clear gradually that this careless, happy life could be continued only by the treacherous abandonment of the best things within him. If any longer he was to be called the son of Pharaoh's

daughter, he must think no more of the bondmen in the brickfields, stooping wearily under the whirling lash; he must learn to despise their misery. And this he could not do; none of us could have done it, were God's Spirit speaking thus home to our heart. So there came a day when his quick sympathy with the oppressed flamed out, and the dread result of a passionate blow opened his eyes. The hasty, instinctive, chivalrous deed, by which he took his brother's part, was the climax of a long preparation. Brave, tender pity for these toiling, suffering, dying Hebrews had for years been moving in him; and now, by one irrevocable act, he claimed the ties of blood once more, and stepped back into the place set for him by his birth.

Note first, then, *the choice asked of Moses*. It was a choice rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. To put it otherwise, his act was not the outcome of mere impassioned heat; it had a moral meaning; it was based on resolute and grave determination. The blow that struck down the petty tyrant may have fired the mine unexpectedly; nevertheless what the two parties before him stood for was clear enough. On the one side the people of God, unresisting, craven, trodden under foot, but with a destiny stretching out illimitably in the future; on the other side, sin, with its fleeting pleasures, in the court and

life of Egypt. This was the parting of the ways for ever; and we have to think of him weighing the issue, reckoning the price—"this accomplished courtier, this child of luxury and pride, this man of letters and of mighty deeds".

In the essentials of the matter it might have happened yesterday; perhaps it did happen yesterday, to you or me. Human nature changes little with the ages, and moral issues never vary. The distinctions of right and wrong, faced by these old fathers of grey time, are like the stars or the mountains to which they lifted up their eyes, and on which men look still and find them eternal and unchanging. Then or now, he who would buy everlasting life must pay for it with sacrifice. The gate that leads to life is narrow; which signifies at least this, that many things must be left outside that we would fain carry through. To a few the sacrifice is easy; by some happy gift of nature they find an instinctive joy in choosing Christ; but to many more, perhaps to most, the thing is hard. How often is a noble life built on the grave of a darling sin!

What answers to this choice for me? you ask. Your own conscience alone can make reply; but it may be one of many things. Perhaps there is a friendship on which you have set your heart, a friendship at war with loyalty to Christ; you must change its inner tone, or say farewell to it, if you are

to choose the better part. Or it is possibly a dubious means of gain, as to which you have had gathering doubts, until now you know that unless it is renounced it will bar you out from the kingdom of God. Or it may be some secret evil habit, sweet for the passing moment, but shameful in memory; if you do not cut the strands, and cast it off, something tells you it will one day drag you down headlong into the pit. Yes! and yet, dear friends, do not let us ward off the thrust which, it may be, this passage is making at our heart by pleading that "the pleasures of sin" can refer only to gross self-indulgence, and taking comfort in the thought that nothing of that kind is chargeable on us. What these pleasures meant for Moses was no base sensuality—he lived above all that—but a stage for his ambition, the intoxicating draught of personal influence and power. And many a man who would scorn to stoop to coarse wrongdoing finds, often to his own intense surprise, that the pursuit of the common ideals of success can rob him of eternal life quite as effectively. Ah! brethren, how often it is not Dives in his purple and fine linen, but poor, battered Lazarus in his rags and his sores that is the victor after all, and goes off the field triumphant at the last. Why, sometimes men whom the bystanders talk about as failures, and who try to creep into a corner where they can live and die as quietly as possible, have prevailed and

won the crown of righteousness, whereas their more brilliant neighbours have been shamefully beaten, and their true life buried out of sight. So, in this age, which tends to measure all things by their size, and all men by their wealth or notoriety, do not let us forget that outward glaring sin is not the only thing that can keep God out of the heart. The worship of success in life can do it just as well; and we have not chosen God truly till we can say sincerely, however falteringly, "I am willing to be poor, beaten, broken, forgotten, if God appoints it so, provided I have Himself". Amiel may have had Moses in his thoughts when he wrote, in the opening sentence of his *Journal:* "There is but one thing needful—to possess God".

The decision asked of Moses, it is clear, was not of a really simple kind, or one that permitted no dubiety. We can see how in his day the Hebrews were as a tribe abject and servile, a herd of dumb, driven cattle; while the career of a statesman is possessed of attraction, surely, for every strong and self-reliant mind. In this regard we are better off than he. By this time the separation of good and evil has worked itself out more lucidly. It is easier now to say where the moral cleavage is. Well, let us see to it that from our vantage-ground we fix the alternatives as bravely as he, and choose between them as unflinchingly. Far away as he is—think of it, centuries deep in the

darkness before Jesus Christ!—does his moral vision and his power of conscience not shame us yet? Do not say that because the older forms of religious belief are breaking up, and criticism is at work upon the Bible, therefore it is impossible to be dogmatic on great disputed questions and to say which side in a moral conflict is right. Never take refuge from a feeble will in intellectual sophistication. In these great moral debates you know with perfect clearness where the people of God stand; rank yourself with them, and you are safe to have chosen the nobler part. Like Moses you prove your belief in God and righteousness when, brushing threats and arguments aside, you can say, "I am a companion of all them that fear Thee, and of them that love Thy precepts".

Note, secondly, *some features of Moses' act.* Sacrifices are of varied price; Moses paid for his at the highest price of all. He surrendered every dream of hope or fancy, and in return he got nothing; nothing measurable by earthly measures; nothing tangible, as we say: only life-long trouble, vexation, weariness, and in the end a lonely grave outside the Promised Land.

Mark, for one thing, that the sacrifice was made at the acme of his powers. He was forty. The harvest of life was just beginning to be reaped; youth's hasty fervours had subsided; he had arrived at that age when, as Froude observes, "ambition becomes power-

ful in men, and takes the place of love of pleasure". Is it not a great thing when those begin to serve God upon whom life has heaped its bounties lavishly? That proves that there is attraction in Jesus Christ for the strong, for the eager, for those in whose veins the red blood is running swiftly; it proves that religion is for others than the broken, the soured, the enfeebled, the disenchanted. Never do we need Christ more than when we are at our best. He has never more to give us than just then; and although His mercy will receive even the wanderer who stumbles in at the eleventh hour, who would reckon as satisfactory religious salvage of that kind? No! there is an instinct in the soul to declare that the gift of life should be laid at Christ's feet with the glow of unexhausted youth upon it. To keep our best days for self is to rob the gift of all its grace, and cast dishonour on His love.

Then besides that, Moses made this surrender just when the people's lot was at its lowest. To join them was to share the degradation and the wretchedness of slavery. Not only so; his previous dealings with them made it very certain that his task would be a vexing and thankless one. Participation in their shame was all they had to offer, and he had everything to lose. What is all this but to say that his action was nobly unselfish? Far more went to produce it than obedience to the stern voice of duty, far

more than strong and masculine resolve; he was moved not less by the gentler yet mightier principle of compassion and of love.

> Love and courage are the spirit's wing,
> Wafting to noble actions.

Look on him now, at this turning point, and that word of his later promise glows wonderfully into meaning: "A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you, like unto me"; for in the silent grandeur of his self-abnegation he is indeed a far-shining type and symbol of a greater far than he, One who for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich.

Unselfishness—no finer moral quality can mark a religious man; nor is it so uncommon, I believe, as cynical observers of life would have us think. No doubt there are exceptions. No doubt men are occasionally to be found who speak glibly of another world, yet are the fleetest in the race to secure this one; men who use piety to cloak greed; men who calculate the profit of religion as carefully as they reckon any other market. But on the whole they are few. The world, be very sure, expects Christians to love their Saviour for His own sake, not for any gain the confession of His name may bring; otherwise, why is there such a burst of triumph from the irreligious when a church-member turns out to be a selfish hypocrite? No surprise or exultation would be ex-

pressed, obviously, were his case not exceptional, were it not felt to be somehow anomalous in one who bore the outward stamp of Jesus. And when men say that they have thrown up religion because religious people are no better than the rest, and are pious only for what they can make by it, it is a lie, and in the secret of their hearts they know it. If any professing Christian has chosen his side for purposes of gain, then the less a Christian he; and his Bible, had he but read it, would have shown him the blackness and horror of his sin.

What, then, is the dominating note in Moses' great act? How shall we name it briefly? In a word, it is *renunciation*. It is the casting away of that which is full of charm and sweetness, the adoption of a neglected and despised cause. Now we are ready, all of us, to admire this spirit at a distance—as we do certain musical instruments—but admiration apart, is there any temper more notably lacking in modern life? Were men ever so unwilling to bear obloquy and trouble for Christ's sake, or to show the reforming mind that takes up patiently the toilsome, rough yoke? Are the young men of our time, for example, what you would describe as strong in renunciation? Do they incline to give up ease or money for the highest things? do they at all believe in giving up? Is not the modern ideal that, in the familiar phrase, of having a good time? Why, in a Scottish city,

the other day, a minister was heard to say that in his congregation deacons were resigning office; and the reason? Because they felt themselves unworthy? Because they were too busy? Not in the least; but in order that they might be free to spend their week-ends at a hydropathic. If we are to speak frankly, what a multitude of our young men need, if they are to have in them the bone and sinew of tested character, is to adopt some noble but down-trodden cause, and be its champions steadfastly in good report and evil. Why are so few of our younger men advocates, for example, of temperance reform? Not because the question is unimportant. Nor yet because they are in theory unconvinced of the necessity of amelioration. I will tell you the reason; it is because temperance work has about it no glamour or romance; it is despised, or at best ignored, by the general opinion of the world. So we choose to be comfortable rather than to be obedient; we shrink from obloquy; and shame be on us for it. It is not thus that life was ennobled in the past, or filled with hope for those that followed after. It is not thus that Christ's name is glorified to-day, or the world in its travail redeemed from sin and wrong.

So, lastly, note *the underlying motive of faith.* And here the first words of my text reach over and join hands firmly with the last: "By faith Moses . . . had respect unto the recompense of the reward". "The

reward"—some one will say; why, then, after all Moses was not wholly disinterested. Even his eye was fixed and bent upon the coming profit. It is as we said; unselfish religion is a dream.

But stay one moment. His eye was bent upon the future; that, of course, is part simply of what is meant by faith. But that very future, how must it appear? Could it promise anything to tempt ambition or gratify mere self? Nothing, as we have seen; nothing but labour, grief and disappointment, and at last a friendless grave. Yet none the less there was a great reward, a recompense past all computation. Look deeper, and it becomes plain that inwardly he was ever more and more possessed, inhabited by God; and for him that was enough. Yes! though in the end every human face withdrew, and not a hand was left to close his eyes, for this man it was enough that he had God and that God had him.

My friends, no basis exists save this for a strong and fearless life. To possess God—it is the one thing needful. We may not be able to keep step for step with Moses in his heroism, but we can imitate his courageous faith; for the weakest of us may overcome the world, and smile at all its threats, if only we have joined ourselves to God in Christ with the grappling-irons of faith and trust. Make this supreme choice well, and all others, when they come, will decide themselves. Keep the vision of faith clear; go often

up into the mountains to behold the far-shining peaks of the Promised Land; and the penalties of nonconformity to the world's rules will not seem of much account. Look up to Him you love, and have your heart at peace in heaven; and when from time to time sacrifice and renunciation are asked of you, and you in turn stand at the parting of the ways, then the power of Him in whom you trust will pass into your weakness, making you strong, and you also will have your place in the great succession of the saints of God.

III

GATES ON EVERY SIDE

On the east, three gates; on the north, three gates; on the south, three gates; and on the west, three gates.—Rev. xxi. 13.

WHEN St. John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, it is clear that the entrance-gates made a deep impression on his mind. Over and over again he comes back to the theme, speaking of their number, their substance, their beauty, and the names written upon them. He tells us, for example, that the city had twelve gates and at the gates twelve angels. Next he relates that the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl. And once more, in this text, we learn that there were three on every side, looking away to the four quarters of the compass, on the east and the north and the south and the west.

It is all a picture, of course; a picture, not in colours but in poetry; a picture of the great love of God the Father. God will have all men to be saved; and the twelve gates, facing each possible approach to the city, are an emblem of that. The doors of the

Father's house look out to all the winds of heaven, and they are shut neither night nor day; for the love of God is open and the heart of God is waiting. Like the entrance to a great city hospital, they are never closed. However late a wanderer may arrive, however long after the rest he may stumble in, broken and weary, he will find that he has been expected, and that kind hands are ready to receive him. The penitent never takes God unawares. The prodigal is always seen a great way off. God's care is not preoccupied, or His mind too full to think of us. Come when or how we may, there are gates of pearl open on every side.

Out of this mystical picture, therefore, I draw the preliminary truth that no point in the spiritual world exists from which men may not travel straight to God. Mr. Spurgeon once said that you could not name a text, in the Old Testament or the New, from which he would not undertake to find his way, right across country, to Jesus Christ; and if instead of a Scripture verse you put any moral condition in which a man may find himself, that is the lesson I am urging now. Wherever you may be in religion, there is a direct line from your spot to one of the open gates of God's city. This is shown by observation and by experience. When Christian people tell the story of their inner life, you discover that they set out from points very far asunder, and that the path each has

taken lay through different scenes, with joys and griefs and perils of its own. Is it not all implicit in the prophet's confession long ago: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way"? "Every one to his own way"—then every one must find his own way back. No man wanders from God precisely as his neighbour does; no man's reclamation is precisely like his neighbour's. Sin is a universal fact; but sin in *you* is as personal as your face, or the colour of your eyes. And salvation is for all the world; but salvation in you is a unique, original thing, it is your own salvation. Each rising sun, touching the wing of sleeping birds, wakes across the woods a fresh burst of melody, as if sun had never risen before; and every time a human soul finds and grasps redemption, faith in him is a new creation, as though he were the first to discover Jesus.

Do not we believers feel this, as we sit here, this holy morning, under the shadow of the Cross? We have, each one of us, our own story to tell of the dangers from which Christ rescued us. We have a personal testimony to give as to the far country from which He fetched us home. Our sin may have been greater than our friend's, or less; but at least it was different; it was *ours*, as our birthday is ours, or our name, or our voice. Here is a man who ever since has given God thanks that grace came breaking in with power,

and saved him from the leprosy of worldliness, so that his flesh came again like the flesh of a little child, and to-day he has a devout and tender heart in his bosom, and can pray. Here is another whom passion had nearly swept down; his feet were almost gone; but Christ the mighty to save held up his footsteps, and brought him into the calm shelter of God's purity, and made his standing there safe for perpetuity. And perhaps there sits still another not far off, whose only sorrow, after all those years of self, is that he can offer to Christ no more than the dregs of what might have been; yet he too gives thanks continually that life's afternoon and evening are full of the radiance of a higher love, and for the blessed hope of possession and of being possessed beyond the grave. Ah! friends, let us believe it anew, for it is a truth to exult in: no wanderer is so deep in sin's maze that he may not seize the gold thread of hope that will guide him back; no land is too far, no sea too wide, or mountain too high, for Christ's seeking love to reach and find us. No kind of sinner can be named who has not been led in, through one of the twelve gates, into God's holy city—not the covetous, not the lustful, not the proud, not even the insincere and false.

Let us now study this picture in mystic poetry from another standpoint. It is a great and moving thought that men find their way to Christ from every

quarter. Yet the gates on every side call up still another suggestion; they recall the variety of *motives* by which men are led to faith. Men come from every direction, but they also come for every kind of reason. All do not make the Christian decision from the same impulse. There are many paths to God. There are many entrances, and many avenues leading to them; and the one important question is whether we have passed in, not which gate we chose. The winner of the Victoria Cross is the man who is brave enough; it matters nothing how or where. Whether at the great moment he was serving in South Africa or North India, in the cavalry or on foot, by night or by day—these things are of no importance. Once it is hanging on his breast, his right to it will never be challenged on such grounds as these. What then are the chief of many ways in which men come to God?

I. Men come *from a sense of duty*. For there is a large class of persons, who, though totally unaffected by emotional appeals, are yet filled with a powerful desire to do right. These people before long are confronted with the personality of Jesus; His words stick in their conscience. Soon they feel that to refuse to submit their will to Christ's is to evade responsibility and evade obligation. So the pressure on conscience grows. The necessity arises of choosing between the higher life and the lower,

of seizing the one real opportunity of life, or making the great refusal. They know that if, while seeing the better, they finally and consciously follow the worse, they may never be able to look into the face of God again. When they meet with Christ in the Gospels, or with a Christlike man in society (and they are not so uncommon), the inward voice declares: That is the kind of life you ought to live, and you know it. When they hear, as we all do, the Master's command rung out across the ages: Follow Me, a great tide of responsive feeling surges up within, and they long to obey. So the conflict in the heart is waged; so the reasons for and against are balanced. Then some day the hour of decision strikes, and the simple duty is done of saying "Jesus is Lord".

Brethren, this may not be the commonest impulse, or the easiest path; yet without question it is an impulse and a path which God Himself has appointed, and if it be followed sincerely it leads to Him. Only, if it is to do anything for us, we must be in deadly earnest, refusing to be content with a desire, and pressing with resolution on to the reality. We must make up our mind to be thorough, taking to ourselves Professor Drummond's advice to University students: "Don't be an amphibian, trying to lead two lives; be out and out". If conscience is urging us to Christ, then we must go all the way with conscience. The sacrifices have to be made that it

demands of pride and independence; aye, and the reparations have to be made that it demands to those whom we have injured. Above all, let us beware of doing anything to deaden this sense of right and wrong which is Christ's best advocate within us. And let us not procrastinate, those of us who have not yet chosen; let us not delay, but strike while the iron is hot, for at a more convenient season our convictions may have grown cold, and all their plasticity be gone. If we do Christ's will as far as it is known to us, beseeching Him for more light, then He will strengthen us to pay the price and to take His will as ours.

II. Others come *from vague discontent with an empty life.* They long for some purpose or ideal worth battling for; they covet an experience adequate to the enthusiasm they know they are ready to give. Often they are young; for it has been said with truth that "young people soon find that life is not so large and rich and animating a thing as they hoped it would be". At first they had dreams of what existence might prove, but these dreams have not come true. The hues of sunrise have turned to grey. Life is losing its glow, its interest, its expectancy; and hope has long parted with its splendour and its charm. It is as if nothing now remained but to settle down in heavy resignation to a career of failure; and at times they see, stretching out before them, the long,

long dusty road that goes down at last into the grave. Then Christ comes to them. He says, I am come that ye might have life, and might have it abundantly. He opens great prospects before their eyes, of hope and joy and possession, of inspiration and freedom that reach out and out infinitely. It is a new world, and they realise that it is all for them. So in simple gratitude and happy wonder they accept what Jesus offers. They take Him at His word, only to find that the black poisonous core of discontent and dulness has thereby been taken out of life, because they have been lifted out of themselves into the higher life of Christ, as He goes before them into the land their souls desire.

Could there be a better reason for repairing to Jesus Christ than that we are unsatisfied and restless, and have learnt that there is satisfaction in Him? Remember, there are instincts in the soul that make no mistake when we let them have their own way. "The hart panteth after the water-brook," and the faintest scent of it will lead him straight over heath and fell to where the rivulet is trickling down the valley; just so, leave our deepest inner longings to themselves, and unerringly they will track out the way to God. Like the compasses in the old iron ships, these hearts of ours may be confused in a hundred passionate ways, but let them speak in a quiet hour, and they plead for Christ. So if you are reach-

ing out eagerly after a larger, richer, nobler life than has hitherto been yours, follow the soul's instinct. Get near to Christ and venture everything with Him. Many will say they have trusted Christians, and repented it, but never one would say so of the Christian's Lord. Believe Him, therefore, when He offers you more abundant life. Take frankly the path in which you are being guided, and you too will have a right to the tree of life, and enter in through the gates into the city.

III. Still others come to God *for shelter*. What these people—a great unnumbered multitude—seek in God is refuge. You may say that this is a side of Christianity fit only for the old and the broken; but I am not so sure of that. A man need not be very old to have buried his first-born, to have felt the touch of that ancient law of God which rends loved ones asunder, and makes havoc of our plans. How many lack the things that make life clear and bright for others! They need friends, and they have only acquaintances; they are oppressed by the awful solitude of life; they are misunderstood, or thought to have nothing in them; in this huge world they feel like children lost in a great city. Once perhaps they were free and light of heart, but grief has tamed their feelings. They have been out in the hailstorms of bereavement, they are beaten by losses, they are worn with struggle. So they long to be sheltered

and solaced and rested. Is it weakness in them to feel like that? Ah! no; the strongest of men have confessed the same deep need; and to any careful reader of the biography of Thomas Carlyle it is plain that even his rugged nature was filled at times with an inexpressible craving for the consolation of a love that will never die. In this he was like little children; for they too seek safety in Christ's love. They can understand that love long before many of us would think it possible; and in their experience, especially if their lives are cheerless, it is sometimes the one spot of brightness and joy.

Here also is a good reason for betaking ourselves to God. Christianity, it has been said, is not a sorrowful religion, but it is a religion for the sorrowful. The Gospel would be no Gospel, and Christ would not be Christ, were there in Him no glad tidings for the friendless and the sad. Men and women! if you long for it, you can have shelter with God. Long ago the Psalmist was sure of that. He was sure of it when he cried, "How excellent is Thy loving-kindness, O God; therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings". And now it is truer and clearer still than then. Jesus Christ has been here, and has uttered sayings that men will clasp and hold to the end of time; He has said nothing more deep, nothing more beautiful, nothing more subduing than the words: "Come unto

Me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest".

IV. Still further, others come *from fear of moral ruin*. They have learnt that they are no match for their own nature; they have discovered how little the anchors of prudence can be trusted when the storms of passion rise. After each collapse they make good resolves, and then these resolves go like matchwood in the next strain. Gradually they yield to temptations of an ignoble sort at which in happier days they would have smiled. At length they grow alarmed. How long is this to last, they say, and where will it end? It is not that they fear an offended God; and there may be very little sense of guilt. But there is an increasing sense of shame and self-disgust, as well as a sickening terror of the evil power that holds them in its grip. So their nerve is sapped, and they half lose each fight before it is begun. Each time the conflict is renewed, they step into the field beaten men; and what they need is not the lash of a threat to whip them into battle, not doses of moral physic that will leave them weaker after every application, but a fountain of vital power within, that will renew the springs of action, and enable them to beat back these tigerish desires, and make them more than conquerors.

Have I described the situation and the need of any one before me? Most probably I have; many more

of our neighbours than we ever dream have their inner life saddened and enfeebled by secret sinful habit. Not a token of it may appear outwardly; yet they are carrying through the world a hidden shame that eats out the joy of life. Now for such men there is a gate leading into the life of God. Do not listen to the devil's plea that fear of moral ruin is no fit motive for trusting God; the day will come when you will thank Him for so chasing you to Himself for protection from your own worse nature. When you have known Christ longer, you will find that He has gifts to bestow far better than deliverance from sin's tyranny; but grasp Him now in the character of which you feel the need most sorely. He can do over again for you what He has done for so many—turn the will that trembled like a reed into a noble growth, strong as the cedars of Lebanon, immovable against the sky-line in the storm, with shelter and hope in it for others. According to your faith it will be unto you; you will be strong with the strength of Him in whom you trust. Take the gate you are nearest to; they all lead into the city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

V. Finally, many come to God *to be forgiven.* All come to this ere long; all must so come; but also many set out from it. A writer has lately said that the feeling of guilt is dead to-day; if that be true, it will pass. There is a soul of honesty in men and

women that may be trusted to keep alive the feeling of accountability, so long as there is a God in heaven and failing, wandering mortals on the earth. In every still hour, when we face ourselves, we know that we need pardon; we are so made that to deny it is to deny our very self. Indeed, there is evil within us all which, if we could, we would fain hide from God Himself; though all the time a better instinct is whispering, surely, that He knows it already, and loves us still. And if some of us are here in God's house this morning, with sins upon us from which we would fain be free, then the Father has bidden all who speak in His name to declare that the cry of faith will bring deliverance, and that all our guilt has been swept away for ever by the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ah! how great and godlike this gospel is; how utterly unlike the manner of men! "Not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His own mercy He saved us." My friends, it is easy to speak with wondering contempt of "salvation in five minutes," and in one sense, doubtless, the phrase has very little in it; but, for my part, if I were beside a dying man, on the battlefield, or in hospital ward, I should feel that a gospel which it was really impossible to state and grasp in five minutes was not what it professed to be, and that grace was no more grace. As Chalmers said, in his great, deep, original way: "What could I do if

God did not justify the ungodly?" Yet this is what our Father does. There is a gate marked *pardon*, and over against it stands the Cross.

Thy love, O Christ, arisen,
Yearns to reach all souls in prison;
Down beneath the shame and loss
Sinks the plummet of the Cross,
Never yet abyss was found
Deeper than Thy love can sound.

Let my concluding word be this, that no one entrance among them all has an exclusive claim against the others. *They all lead in;* and it is the redeeming love of God that has opened every one. It cannot signify how a man makes his way to Christ, if only he finds and holds Him at the last. From the beginning the manifesto of the gospel has run: "The Father waits. Listen, and you will hear Him say, Return this very hour. Come home to Me, and come at once." Now is the accepted time. And when at last Love's great work is done, and Christ has drawn the world to Him, we shall know how vast and true was that ancient word of promise: "They shall come from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, and shall sit down in the Kingdom of God".

IV

THE REDEEMED LIFE GOD'S WORKMANSHIP

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.—Ephes. ii. 10.

In this text and many Pauline statements which resemble it, extraordinary emphasis is laid upon the supreme agency of God in the salvation of men. Language is used which has at least the appearance of implying that God is so much the author of religion, so exclusively the origin and moving impulse of our experience as Christians, that no place remains for what man may do or leave undone. We seem to be taught the passiveness of man and the sole activity of God. Human choice and human feeling seem to merge in the irresistible and all-embracing Divine purpose, as the transient and unconscious ripple is merged in the vast sea.

The dangers of such a representation no one will question. It is easy to deduce from it uncompromising doctrines of election and fore-ordination which go near taking the edge off the warnings and exhorta-

tions of Scripture, bidding men fight against sin and strive after holiness. If God does all and man is unable to do anything; if God fills earth and heaven, eternity and time, while before Him man shrinks into an insignificant portion of the endless whole; what can be the use of prayer or thought or conflict? Are they not discounted in advance? For we know beforehand, do we not, that that alone can happen which God has appointed, only those be saved whom it is God's will to save?

Yet it is noticeable that the elements in the traditional view of Divine election by which men have been repelled are not its positive but its negative aspects. Religious men have not found it hard to acknowledge that all our good, all our blessing and achievement, is traceable to the love of God. That love is the fount of all redemption; and the instinctive belief of every Christian mind goes joyfully with the great words of St. Paul: "By the grace of God I am what I am". In other words, the immovable axiom on which all believing assurance rests is the conviction that salvation, in its beginning, middle and end, is the work of God's free, unbought compassion. Every Christian knows, as it has been put, "that it is God who saves, and that when He saves it is not by accident, or to reward human merit, but in virtue of His being what He is—a God who is eternally and unchangeably Redeemer". This is truth born out of

personal experience; it is truth that spontaneously arises in the Christian consciousness when at any time it proceeds to give itself an account of its own situation. Indeed, let the sense of redemption only be quickened, and the feeling of sin become vivid and overpowering, and at once the certainty of God's choosing and saving grace leaps into the fore-front of the mind, and swallows up every other thought. In such an hour the soul has eyes only for what God does, all the experiences of redeemed men being instinctively thrown into the passive voice, as in the familiar words:—

> Chosen not for good in me,
> Wakened up from wrath to flee,
> Hidden in the Saviour's side,
> By the Spirit sanctified.

On the other hand, the note of certainty which is so conspicuous in this positive doctrine of election is entirely absent from the negative doctrine of reprobation, or the tenet that some men are unconditionally barred out from salvation by God's pre-temporal decree. For the doctrine of reprobation there is simply no ground in experience at all. It is one thing for a Christian to believe that God chose him in Christ before the foundation of the world; for here he is but putting into explicit words the immediate assurance that he is being saved by "a redeeming mercy which is older than the world" and has had no beginning.

But where is the man who can plead his own experience for the view that God, from the first, designed some people to be lost for ever? Where is the man who can affirm, *out of his own experience*, that God has shown him that he is the object of a Divine hate which is older than the world, and that his salvation is for ever rendered impossible by obstacles inherent in the Divine will? It is an idea which can barely be expressed in words. Let us recollect, therefore, that while the positive doctrine of election by grace has a glorious and indefeasible place in the Christian creed, because it springs naturally and spontaneously out of the experience of redeemed men, on the other hand the negative doctrine of eternal reprobation has no place there, and can only be introduced by an illegitimate and presumptuous use of narrow and abstract logic.

Furthermore, if we thus concentrate our minds on the positive aspect of predestination—which is that salvation begins with God, and begins in eternity, and that in the realisation of its purposes there can be no break-down—we understand in some degree the unspeakable consolation derived from this doctrine in many ages by men of God, as well as its influence, which we know to have been profound, in producing moral heroism of the noblest type. The conviction that God had chosen them in His everlasting love, and that nothing could separate them from their

Redeemer, enabled these tried men and women to endure. Nothing can go beyond such a faith, and in times of need it is the only ground which we feel does not shake under our feet. Hence in eras of persecution, when men's hearts were failing them for fear, the saints of God, and especially their leaders, were sustained by the knowledge that for each individual soul there is a vocation as real as if that soul were alone upon the planet. It is out of the midst of such Divine certainties that St. Paul drew his list of great things which God has done, or is doing, for those who trust Him: "whom He did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified". In these words we have the true apostolic doctrine of election, and we have the whole of it. It is not a doctrine to conceal (otherwise it would not be Christian), or to preach with bated breath; it is a message of unchanging Divine faithfulness, to be proclaimed as the last ground of all our security and all our joy.

Assuming then this great conviction as the background of our text, let us look at the particular applications which St. Paul now gives it.

Note, first, *the Christian's new nature.* "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." The idea that in believing men a change has been wrought which amounts to a reconstituting of their nature, is

here expressed twice over, for the sake of emphasis. To begin with, the word translated "workmanship" implies that a Christian owes his character and standing to God precisely as a *poem* owes its conception to the singer's intellect and fancy. The dramas he produced we call the works of Shakespeare, and in like manner Christian men and women are the works of God. God is the author of what they now are. A believer's soul is the Divine poem. Elsewhere in the physical world we may read the Divine prose, but when God writes His name in a human heart, that is His poetry.

Then besides that, the same idea is underlined by the use of a second cognate term; we are *created*, says the apostle, in Christ Jesus. Creation is one of those words which distinguish, and form the special glory of, the Bible. Doubtless in other religious books you will find cosmogonies and cosmologies of the most varied kind; half-noble, half-fantastic attempts to explain the origin and genesis of all that is. But it was left for the Bible, as some one has said, "to inscribe the name of God on all things visible and invisible, and append to it the word *create*". The note is struck in its first sentence. "In the beginning God created."

Now that great process of creation, thus flung into prominence at the very outset, is not something which claims a merely antiquarian interest. So far from

belonging solely to the remote past, it takes place still whenever a soul passes into the Divine kingdom. Creation is the production of the original, the underived; and when a man first kneels at the Cross there is coming to birth in him a new unprecedented element or principle, which may be reckoned on to transform his character from end to end. That the process may be a long one in no way alters its intrinsic nature; whether it takes minutes or days or years, in essence it is still the same. Always it implies that a human life has taken a new start, of a kind which only Divine power can explain. "If any man be in Christ, there is a new creation; the old things are passed away, behold, they are become new."

The main charge directed against such a statement has always been that it is far away from real life. In experience, it is said, there is nothing corresponding to this strange notion; it is a mere speculation. Yet in sober fact scarcely any other aspect of the Christian gospel has so vital a relation to our common life as just this glad promise or affirmation of the new birth. Take a typical example. Here is a man who, in consequence of moral struggle and moral failure, has become intensely dissatisfied *with himself;* with himself, be it noted, not with his environment or opportunities, but with himself. It is now clear to him that some native fault is present in his temperament

which forbids him ever to attain any nobleness or beauty of moral life. Something is wrong with the very constitution that has been handed down to him; his nature is biassed, and, as it seems, hopelessly biassed on the side of evil. Why, he asks bitterly, why should he have been saddled with this hard destiny? Why should others have at worst to contend with temptations from outside, while he must fight with a principle seated in his very life-blood? In his despair he is tempted to say that he can only hope to make a new beginning by ceasing first to be himself. In the words of a great Christian writer, "there is no hope for him in this life; death and only death can break up the villainous structure of his nature. If he could die and begin again he might have a chance, but that would be his only chance. Nothing could help him but that he could be born afresh."

I have spoken of this type as though it were in some way exceptional; but of course it is not exceptional. In reality it is the case of every man. Our individual sins may vary; one may have to fight with jealousy, another with pride, another with the coarser passions of greed and lust. But of all it holds true that a taint is in the blood; something is radically amiss with the nature we have brought into the world. And in times of insight we perceive that, if we are to live the victorious life, a great recreative change must pass upon us, which, only short of

destroying personal identity, will make us spiritually new men.

Brethren, is it not the glory of Christ's gospel that this great thing can be? This sloughing off of the old nature, this robing ourselves in the new nature, is precisely what is offered to us in Him. Have you felt that you need a fresh beginning ere you can be the man you ought to be? Just such a fresh beginning is open to you now. Have you felt that victory was attainable only if you could pass through the cleansing fires of death, and commence again with transfigured powers and instincts? Why, you are using the very terms and metaphors St. Paul employs in describing the actual influence of Jesus Christ as he had known it. "Our old man," he writes, "was crucified with Christ, so that we should no longer be in bondage to sin"; "they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts"; "reckon yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord". In each case the fact is insisted on that the old nature is subjected to death, while from its ashes, like the phœnix in ancient legend, springs the new nature that is to be. So that in this gospel of regeneration, as we may call it, there is overflowing hope and promise for the weakest and worst. Let us only believe in Jesus Christ as our Redeemer, and we shall have the first-fruits of it now, and an ever-deeper appropria-

tion as the years go on. Day after day the current of its power will flow through all our nature, and make it pure.

Note, secondly, *the purpose for which the new nature is bestowed.* We are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works". Over and over again in the history of the Church, as you are aware, serious and bitter controversy has prevailed as to the right place of good works in the religious life. The questions have been such as these: What is the relation between my good works and my acceptance with God? Are good works the cause of salvation, or are they the fruit of it? Is a man justified because he amends his life, or does the power to amend life flow from justifying faith? A good many people, unable to distinguish between words and things, assure us that these questions are out of date, modern thought having passed into quite another phase; but so long as human nature remains itself, this, we may be sure, will never happen. Just as the ancients possessed the same bodily features we now have, so these early believers and we are alike in spiritual physiognomy, and questions by which their life was agitated are somehow vital for us also. They may change in form, but not in essence. What means the gospel of salvation by character, for example, which reappears in modern religious literature so frequently, but just the old persistent heresy pulverised by St. Paul long ago in the Epistle to the

Galatians, according to which men are saved by the works of the law, rather than by faith in the Son of God?

St. Paul indicates in one brief phrase the right relation of good works to the Christian life. It is "unto good works" that we are created in Christ. Or, to put it otherwise, good works, holiness, godlike character, is the aim of God in creating us afresh; it is His ultimate goal; accordingly it cannot be the cause of our being saved, but must be its issue and consequence. It is the fruit of the good tree, not its root or vital sap; and we are said to be created for good works just as a tree is created, or exists, for its fruit. Hence the true relation is altogether distorted and reversed when character and conduct are made preconditions of our obtaining Divine grace, instead of the joyous result of our having accepted it.

Now this is in no sense a trifling point; on the contrary, it is a point the right apprehension of which is of vital significance for our conception of Christianity. After all, what is Christ prepared to do for me? Somehow, I feel, new life is connected with Him; well, is it a life that I am to work up *to*, or that I am to work out *from?* The two things, clearly, are separated by the whole diameter of being. Are righteousness and spiritual excellence the condition of my pardon and restoration, or are they the natural outcome of my being pardoned? In the first case,

the Christian religion is obviously just a kind of sublimated Judaism, a lofty but legal system of performance and reward, dragging us downwards by an ever-accumulating weight of shortcoming; in the second, it is a veritable gospel for weak and erring men, bestowing on us new life at the very outset, and thereby evoking good works as spontaneously from that new vital principle as the clusters of the vine bourgeon and ripen from the mounting sap. Implant a man in the life of Jesus Christ, graft him spiritually by faith on that mighty stem, and varied excellence of character will show itself as unfailingly as the violet or the thrush's song in May.

It is a usual charge against evangelical Christianity remember, that it exhibits a culpable indifference to morality. "You speak only of faith," it is said; "you care nothing about conduct. You are all for dependence upon grace, so much so that you put character wholly in the background." But the difference between evangelical Christianity and its critics is entirely mis-stated if it be said that the one neglects morality, while the others put it in the forefront. Both parties, as I conceive, are equally intent upon morality; for both regard personal holiness and likeness to Jesus Christ as the chief end of human life. The point at issue really concerns the means by which this common end is to be attained. Those to whom Christianity is mainly a sublime system of precepts depend on

exhortation, example, and the gradual elevation of character under influences of that kind. And what actual experience shows is that there is a more excellent way, infinitely more certain to secure its aim. According to this view, let a man only attach himself to Christ, becoming partaker in the victorious powers stored in Him, and the question of morality solves itself. Only let him abide in Jesus, and the energy and beauty of godlike character are the necessary outcome of that relation. It is a problem exactly parallel to that of slave labour. If the end of labour be taken as the maximum of production, then the question history had to solve was this, How is this end attained most effectively, by slave labour or by free? In Greece, in Rome, in our own dependencies a hundred years ago, an unhesitating answer was given in favour of slavery; yet emancipation had only to become a fact to prove that, even from the economic point of view, freedom was inestimably the more advantageous of the two. So is it also in religion. Let men believe that they must purchase salvation by hard, grim toil, as the mere bond-slaves of God, and their hands will sink in weakness and despair. But tell them that in Jesus Christ they are the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty, and grateful love and wonder will evoke a beauty and a wealth of goodness of which else they had vainly dreamed.

So now note, lastly, *the pre-ordained Divine ideal.*

These good works, the apostle adds, "God has prepared that we should walk in them". In other words, for each of us a path of spiritual development has been prepared beforehand, our travelling by which will be the realisation of that Divine ideal of our life which has hovered before the mind of God from the beginning.

This reveals how mistaken is the very common idea that the Christian life is meant to be modelled on a fixed pattern, and that any deviation or originality of type is an extremely suspicious feature. Some people find it hard to clear their minds of the notion that believers, like bricks, must be facsimiles of each other; the unconscious argument being that if every Christian is Christlike, they will all simply reproduce each other. But God, who does nothing vainly or at random, delights in that which is individual; He prepares us for the pathway of good works because He has also prepared the pathway for us; the two have originated together in His mind. It has been chosen for us, as a fitting stage to educe and develop our special powers; we have been created for it, and therefore endowed with the powers it will call for. Men differ in gifts and aptitudes as infinitely as do the leaves of a tree in form and texture; and one of the beautiful and inspiriting thoughts that lie, like precious grains of gold, beneath the surface of this text, is the message that God has His own ideal for

each one of us, and therefore would have us manifest the Christlike and Christ-nourished life each in his own way. God keeps no set moulds into which character must run; rather the mould is broken after the emergence of each new life. For each the end of the journey is the same—when we shall all come to the measure of Christ's fulness—but one may approach the far-shining summit up a gentle slope, soft with grass and deep with flowers, another over morass and torrent, and at last along the flinty way where the tender feet are bruised, and the wind blows keen across the snow. It matters little, if only we tread the ordained pathway of God.

Most of us, I daresay, have at some time or other been deeply pained by the feeling that our life is meaningless, with no perceptible drift or trend—a mere series of experiences, leading nowhere and signifying nothing. Yet that is, almost certainly, because we are viewing it too close at hand. Let us gain the safe remoteness of a prayerful hour, and at once it will stand out clearly, even to our eyes, as the prepared highway of the King. God will never lead us where there is no way. It is marvellous how often, when the road seems to end in a blank wall of rock, if only we go forward with humility and a surrendered will, a passage opens up in the cliff, and lets us through. The last retrospect will prove that all was ordered by a love that passeth knowledge. And for the present,

let us walk humbly with God, asking that we may be prepared for all He has prepared for us, feeling it enough that in Jesus Christ He has travelled all the way before us. "Lead me, O Lord, in Thy righteousness, because of mine enemies; make Thy way straight before my face."

V

HONOUR RETRIEVED

John, whose surname was Mark.—Acts xii. 12.

Not the least interesting way of studying the Bible, as you may have found, is to fix upon one of its many minor characters, and trace out, in ordered detail, all that can be known about him. Often it is surprising that so much should be ascertainable, and that so adequate a picture can be drawn of his life and personality. To-day let us try an experiment in this sort of Scripture biography. Let us try to write the life, in outline at all events, of John whose surname was Mark; and we shall discover, I think, that there are facts in this life which are also side-lights on our own.

Our information about Mark, limited as it is, falls into four distinct parts, each covering years, and each contributing a suggestion. If we simply follow the narrative, in the chronological order of its divisions, we get a full impression of what the man was in himself, and what his career means for us. Look then at the four chapters of the story.

(1) First, *Mark's home.* This is chapter one in every biography; and about Mark's birthplace and early years also we have intelligence enough to make it the first section of our study. The passage where our text occurs tells us all we know. He was the son of a Christian woman in Jerusalem, whose name was Mary. By the time we are dealing with she may have been a widow, since we hear not a word about the father; and it is possible she was a person of substance, for her house in the city was large enough to contain quite an assemblage of believers. Indeed, she appears to have occupied rather an outstanding position in the little Christian society. The atmosphere of her house, too, must have been charged with warm and attractive Christian faith, for we find the disciples gathered there for prayer—always a good sign—while after his escape from prison St. Peter went straight to her door as a matter of course, and was received familiarly, as an old friend. In short, we have presented to us, in one of those natural vignettes of which the Bible is full, the picture of a Christian family of the best type.

Well, no one starts in life with so immense an advantage as the man who had been bred in a Christian home. Nothing else that could be named or thought of would have given him a send-off like that. For one thing, all the chances are in favour of his becoming a Christian himself, as Mark did. I do not say

that redeeming grace is hereditary, or that religion can be handed down like family jewels from father to son; but I do say that on this subject there are wonderful promises in the Gospel, and that parents whose dedication of their children to God in baptism is a reality, and who trustfully fulfil their vows of religious nurture, are justified in expecting their sons and daughters to grow up *in Christ*. Why, the influences in a home like that are all in one direction! The young hearts find it difficult to resist, and very easy to yield. They get the priceless conviction fixed in heart and mind that faith is not a thing of times and seasons, but a steady power, fruitful in peace and gladness because rooted in fellowship with God. Some modern champions of enlightenment are eager that we should give up *biassing* young people—as they call it—in favour of Christianity, being of opinion that they ought to be left in total ignorance of religion, and thus be in a position to make a quite unprejudiced choice for themselves when they grow up. Well, if we could get the devil to accept that compact also, we might venture it a little more. But, as things are, we have to work for Christ with the young, for we know that the other side is working, all the time, night and day. Hence the vast importance of Christian nurture. And the man who, as he closes the door of home behind him, and steps into the world, carries with him, and keeps, the inextinguishable certainty that fellowship

with Christ is a real thing, from which victory flows, will rarely be heard lifting his voice on the side of the scorner. Personal religion is the natural fruit of the right sort of home.

Then, besides that, this advantage is gained—the formation of habits which aid Christian life when it comes. One of the hardest duties of many a young convert is the duty of unlearning. If his first surroundings were secular merely, in all likelihood he acquired ways that have to be changed now at the cost of pain. Whereas if he was trained to be truthful, reverent, sober,—well, these virtues certainly don't make him a Christian; but they form a great part of his capital when once he is fairly launched into the business of the Christian life. God has His own wonderful method of using later the gifts or attainments we won before His love subdued us. Habits that were wrought into the very substance of our being in the old home long ago, stay on with us in the testing years of Christian manhood. They are like the dye which has so saturated the cloth that, as long as two threads hold together, the colour will be there.

And yet another advantage is the memories we carry from a Christian home. How the riches of life flow from memory! How we pity those who have nothing in youth to recall—no holidays, no summer visits to the country, or winter visits to the town, no presents, no exciting journeys by coach or

rail or ship! And what shall we say of those whose home is best forgotten?—as in the case of that man who said he could never bear to speak of God as *father;* the name awoke such dreadful memories. But a home-circle where God is worshipped and Christ loved —where is there an influence stronger than this to quicken faith and cheer the heart in after years? In his *History of the Crimean War*, Mr. Kinglake tells how the English troops, marching to the field of Alma, crossed wide patches of ground covered with a peculiar herb, curiously fragrant as they tramped over its twigs and leaves. At last there came up some regiments which had been recruited in the western counties of England, and then a strange look passed over some faces, and here and there even an eye grew moist with tender thoughts. It was the same southernwood, the odour of whose sprays, gathered by some loved hand, had often filled the village church at home; and men went on with braver hearts to the struggle that awaited them because of the encounter. Men and women, with children growing up about you, see to it that you make such a home for them that to recall it afterwards will make them braver for Jesus Christ; and you, who are sheltered in these homes, let their peace and purity be dear to you, and guard their honour as your life.

(2) *Mark's hour of desertion.* A report of this strange, sad collapse is given in the thirteenth chapter of this

book. Mark, you remember, had joined the pioneer band of missionaries from Antioch, of which Barnabas his cousin was the leader and Paul second in command. So long as they kept to familiar ground, like the Island of Cyprus, the youngest member of the party proved satisfactory enough. But no sooner had they crossed into Asia Minor, and struck a line for the dangerous mountain-passes, than his courage failed, and he suddenly turned back. As it has been put, "he lost heart and ran home to his mother". His reasons for this craven act we are left to guess. Perhaps he saw that his relative Barnabas was gradually becoming St. Paul's follower instead of his leader, and resented the change. Perhaps St. Paul's preaching to the Gentiles was too liberal for his taste; there *are* people who would like to be more orthodox even than an apostle. Perhaps we are too hard on him, and all he wanted was to protect his friends in Jerusalem from the impending famine. At the same time, had these been his motives, it is not likely that St. Paul would have treated him so severely. For, as every one knows, when the apostle was setting out later on a second missionary tour, and Barnabas suggested they might take Mark with them, St. Paul positively declined to have him. One experience of his selfish weakness was enough, he said; the man could not be depended on. And for long there is an unbroken silence between them.

Here then you have an instance of what happens now and then—the sudden breakdown of a Christian man, with all its bitter disappointment for his friends and its grief for his Divine Master. I am not going to dwell on its shame or guilt; let me rather point out one or two of its consequences. For example, it brings an interruption of usefulness. Do you see how instantly Mark drops out of the story of Acts? Not a syllable about him for years after; the main stream of events pushes him aside. That one surrender to weakness robbed him of promotion, in soldier's phrase, and reduced him to the ranks. So the lesson meets us squarely that success in God's work is endangered terribly, and may be lost outright, by some conscious indulgence of our lower nature. The sin may cripple us for life. The memory of failure may haunt us to the end, with stains so deep upon the soul that years' repentance cannot wash it out. Think of that when the voice of the tempter sounds pleasantly. Think of the power for God and for righteousness you will lose if you consent. "Ah! me," says one of the best of men, "ah! me, for the saints of God that are pinioned and powerless, because of some secret compact with the enemy." Such things we do in the stupor or frenzy of passion, and wake to find they have robbed us of our strength.

Then, over and beyond that, Mark's weakness caused a quarrel between two good men. On the one

side was Barnabas, eager that his nephew should have a second chance, on the other Paul maintaining as firmly that the runaway was untrustworthy. So the two friends parted in anger—all because of Mark's cowardice or slackness or both. Is not that a picture of the rise of many a division in the Church—sides being taken about some delinquent, one party protesting that he has been treated harshly, the other clear that discipline must be maintained; with, as the outcome of it all, mutual rancour and suspicion, and wounds dealt by evil-speaking that nothing on this side death will ever heal? The peace and prosperity of Christ's Church is a tender growth; and it is one of the most diabolical attributes of sin that its unforeseen consequences are so baleful, and that the smallest beginnings turn out to be so hatefully fertile, often, in animosities between Christian people. And then how delighted outsiders are to watch these quarrels! How gladly they warm their hands at the flames and carry fuel to the fire! Thus it is for every true member of Christ's body to remember that the welfare of the Church is in his hands, and that if his sin should ever prove a dividing wedge between good men, it will leave him with a long, long store of unavailing sorrow.

Moreover, for the time being at least, Mark lost the regard of his fellow-Christians. The feeling of distrust, to which St. Paul gave expression, seems to

have spread further. From a passage in an Epistle written twelve years later we learn that in the Church at Colosse, for example, there was still some reluctance to give Mark a cordial welcome. Apparently they too had heard of that old fault, and the evil odour of it still hung about him. We never know how long the reputation of a former sin may follow us about the world. In my time at Edinburgh University we expelled a man from a club, deservedly, and eight years later he came back from South America to try to get the record of that evening's work expunged from the minutes. So it is in the great Christian club of the Church; the old rumour turns up again, and brings suspicion and tongue-tied reserve in its train. Perhaps good people are sometimes too unwilling to forgive and forget the past, and to believe better things of their comrade. But, however that may be, at least it is sadly difficult to regain confidence that has once been forfeited; and the reflection that we may alienate once for all those whose esteem is priceless should help to hold us back, both from sin and folly. That ancient prayer of the Psalmist has a message for each of us: "Let none of them that wait on thee, O Lord, be ashamed for my sake".

(3) Thirdly, note *Mark victorious and restored.* Our information for this chapter in the story comes from one of the last letters ascribed to St. Paul, the second Epistle to Timothy. There, not far from the end, we

read: "Only Luke is with me: take Mark, and bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for the ministry". Well, there are few pleasanter things in the New Testament than this elevation of Mark right to a place in what you may call the personal body-guard of St. Paul. It is delightful, as well as touching, to see the lonely old man, with death not far off, full once more of desire for Mark's affectionate care. We like the story to end so; nothing else would have been worthy of them both. For a time they had "stood apart, like cliffs that had been rent asunder"; but now all that was cast behind them and forgotten, and the bonds of friendship knit and sealed afresh.

So that it is possible to efface a blemished past. It is possible to expiate early faults, and regain what has been lost. Let no man think that old days and old sins must hang a dead-weight on his neck and cripple him hopelessly for ever. The burden can be flung off in God's name, by faith and penitence, and a new start taken. There is forgiveness with God. There is power with Him to turn the shadow of death into the morning; to restore the soul; to cast our failures and our trespass into the depths of the sea. Christ, the crucified, comes to us with the message that grace can undo the past, and lift off the old load, and bring back the fruitless years. The old sin can be blotted out of sight; and more, the weakness that led to the sin can be overcome. And

if there is any man listening to me now whose life has been saddened by some old collapse and failure, with the clinging memories of treachery due to such an act, then I bring him good tidings. Sin is not the deepest thing in you, though your heart may often condemn you to think it is; for God's love in Christ goes deeper than sin, down far beneath all its burrowings and concealments; and that cleansing forgiving love will cut the roots of your weakness, and God will baptise you into a fresh manhood of power, if only you will trust Him to do it. Grasp Him as the source of power; face and meet Him as He comes seeking you; take His promises of forgiveness and liberty as having all His faithfulness and all His love behind them, and the experience of thousands will repeat itself also for you—you will step out of the gloom of night into the sun, and feel moving upon your brow the air of the new day.

Then again, I note this with peculiar interest, that Mark's victory was gained on the very field where he had lost. Precisely at that point where he had given way previously, he recovered himself, and fought his way back to honour. It was from cowardice that he failed in Asia Minor, for then, as we have seen, he shrank away from the apostle's side, and left him to face the perils of the mountain-pass alone. Well, in the end, that coward had become conspicuously brave. In the Epistle to the Colossians we see him at Rome,

at the very focus of danger, standing at the captive Paul's side, notoriously attached to a state-prisoner whose sentence of death was already on the way. And so, where he had been weak, *there* he became strong. That may be our experience too, brethren. With God all things are possible; His power can act along the line of greatest resistance. The man of evil temper may become specially kind and patient. The victim of a vile imagination may come to enjoy the peace of a spotless mind. The liar may grow to love and suffer for the truth. The arrogant and selfish may learn to stoop and serve the brethren. Peter vanquished his besetting sin, and his character, like many a broken limb, came in after days to be all the stronger for the shock that once had crushed it. If you have fallen, be courageous enough to take that as God's indication of the field where you are yet to be more than conqueror. Sin may draw our attention, poignantly, to some weak, unsound spot in our lives; and thereafter, if we take the hint, toil and prayer may make that very spot impregnable. Historians tell how in the sixteenth century a naval engagement took place off the north coast of Italy between the fleets of Genoa and Venice, at which the Genoese sustained a crushing defeat. The beaten admiral drew off for some days to repair damages, but, when that was done, he immediately ordered sail to be set for the scene of the former battle. "What," said his officers,

"return to the place where we were routed?" "Yes," he replied, "it was rendered famous by our defeat, and I wish to make it immortal by our victory." That should be the hope we cherish in our conflict. If we strike a league with Christ, and have His love dwelling within, to bless and cheer, no loss or failure could be named that we may not triumphantly retrieve. The unguarded entrance, that has once let in the foe, can be made the most secure of all.

Lastly, we have *Mark the Evangelist.* That is the noble close of this biography. The man who fled from his post, the man who deserted basely on the eve of battle—it is he that, after pardon and restoration, rose so high as to receive the honour of writing the first Life of Jesus Christ. With such completeness had he regained the confidence of Christians that one day, many think at the personal instigation of St. Peter, he took pen in hand to tell the story of the Life of lives—the life and death that has redeemed us all. So low he fell, so high at last he climbed. The early Church received and treasured that Evangel as a priceless gift of God, and to this hour the Gospel of St. Mark is carrying the figure of Jesus, in all its Divine energies and human tenderness, into the love and adoration of the world.

Thus, friends, John Mark stands before our minds to prove how it is possible to recover from what

at first seems a hopeless fatal sin, and rise on that stepping-stone to power with men for Jesus Christ. How ready men are to utilise an old weakness as a pretext for sinking always lower! "I made a mistake once," they will say, "and I never could get above it." But in truth we may take the humiliation of a sin in two ways, one the very antipodes of the other. It may demoralise us into recklessness, or it may startle us into vigilance and humility. It may shape us or be shaped by us. It may drive us from Christ or send us trusting to His feet. Which of the two God means I need not tell you. His unchanging love can use even our falls and failures to teach us the lesson of leaning on His power. May we learn that lesson, not as slaves of a retribution we fear, but as dear children of His love, and, so learning, mount alike on defeats and victories to a higher plane of service and of fellowship with the Father and the Son.

VI

A FRIEND IN NEED

The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus ; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain.—2 Timothy, i. 16.

This letter, many scholars think, may have been penned on the very eve of the great apostle's death. We seem to have a premonition of the end in that brave verse of the fourth chapter: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith". Our text, therefore, has in it something of the peculiar weight and intensity that ofttimes characterise parting words of the dying. St. Paul was never prone to indiscriminate praise or blame. He had greater matters in hand than the strewing of compliments even upon his coadjutors in the proclamation of the Christian gospel. Hence we may assume that the singularly cordial words he speaks of Onesiphorus are the product of deep and manly feeling. Perhaps he felt that Timothy, who seems to have been rather a weakling, scarcely appreciated Onesiphorus as he deserved, or that, at all events, it would do no harm to draw his attention pointedly to the

splendid work this man had done for Christ. Be that as it may, he enters on the subject with such obvious warmth and a minuteness so unusual that we perceive how near his heart it lay. To the magnanimous it is a delight to praise the worthy with good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

Probably it was the sense of contrast that reminded St. Paul of Onesiphorus just here. He had been speaking of certain apostates who fell away miserably, and may have dragged down others in their fall. And to the apostle the bitterest thought of all was not that they had deserted him, but that they had deserted Christ their Saviour. *That* touched him to the quick. Some people are apt to identify attachment to them with attachment to Jesus Christ; but that is always a wrong and a mistake. We all have our own personal faults, some of them sufficiently repellent; and it will never do to talk as if persons who are out of sympathy with us—with whom, in the familiar phrase, we cannot "get on"—are for that reason out of sympathy with Jesus. After all, as it has been put, we are just as different from other people as they are from us, and this must not be forgotten. St. Paul had nothing of this pettiness of mind. No doubt he broke off from Barnabas over the weak fondness that good man felt for his runaway nephew, John Mark, but it would have startled him to be told that because Barnabas had parted

with him, he had parted with Christ also. But with Phygellus and Hermogenes, traitors whom he names in the previous verse, it was another story. They had left the Master first, and the servant only in consequence; and it was over the first of these events, not the second, that St. Paul grieved most keenly. In the same way it was not Onesiphorus' personal fidelity to him that struck the deepest chord in his nature, or gave him sweetest satisfaction; it was the loyalty to Christ that shone out in the kindness of his friend. Brethren, it is a very little thing, from certain points of view, that men should serve us. For that they may have many reasons; some of them high, others not so high. But if they do it for Christ's sake; if His Spirit stirs and moves them; if a common attachment to Him, magnet-like, is drawing them and us together, then they and we alike are blessed in their deed, and from that root undying memories may spring.

Let us look more closely, then, at St. Paul's words concerning this man. Onesiphorus means bringer of help; so that in this instance at least name and nature coincide; for it was the promptness and the richness of the help he brought that went to Paul's heart.

First, then, consider Onesiphorus *in the rôle of a Christian friend.* One of the qualities in him which these verses specially underline is, you will note, the consistency of his helpfulness. That came out

originally in the three years St. Paul gave to Ephesus. During that period Onesiphorus proved himself, steadily, one of those priceless collaborators in religious work—men who can be trusted to stick to the duty they take up, instead of casting it aside when the glamour of novelty is worn off, or the first group of difficulties emerge. What a windfall such a subordinate officer is to a captain in Christ's army!—a man who will not fail his leader so long as it is physically possible to appear, but turns up at his post with undeviating regularity, late or early, rain or fair. Men of this stamp act in character wherever they may be; and with Onesiphorus it was so, obviously, for when he came to Rome, and learnt that the apostle was in trouble, his steady kindliness and love were manifest at once. St. Paul lay in prison, incarcerated so closely, it is probable, that he would take some searching for; but the trusty Ephesian never rested till he had tracked him to his cell, and grasped his hand. One of the saddest things about human virtue, and even about much moral excellence in Christians, is just that you can't depend on it. To-day it bears the strain, to-morrow it breaks down. Once out of the old groove, away from the familiar scene, it is itself no longer; it takes the line of least resistance and shirks its duty. All the more inspiring it is to encounter a man like this, as, thank God, we do so often—zealous, beneficent, firm, the same faithful

comrade in the years when St. Paul toiled night and day in Ephesus and in the dark months when he lay rusting in a dungeon, the same true helper at home and in the foreign city. Brethren, this life can give few nobler decorations, few loftier virtues can be won, than a sound, tried reputation as a friend and fellow-Christian. Let good men feel that they may reckon on your aid, let them feel that when the needy require help, or the forces of evil must be flung back, they may count on you every time, and you will be a strength, not a weakness, to the Saviour's cause. Aim at this, and put your soul into the acquisition of it, for no better certificate can be had in the sight of God or man.

Two features, I imagine, in Onesiphorus' conduct at Rome touched St. Paul with peculiar gratitude. In the first place, he took pains to help his friend. "He sought me out very diligently, and found me." It is true that most people will do a kind turn if the occasion comes their way, if they trip right over an urgent case, and cannot well avoid doing something. But there is no quick eye for openings. Until distress is flung in their path by accident, they wait and wait, and might as well not be in the world at all. Often they are quite good-natured people, with intentions of the very best kind; but their chance is small of winning that great commendation at the last: "I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was

in prison, and ye came unto Me". They fail to consider that if God had waited until sinners found Him, we should be in an evil plight; instead of that, in Jesus Christ He sought us out very diligently and found us, He came to seek and save the lost. It scarce needs arguing that any man desirous of getting through this life without having his taste offended or his heart wrung by sights of misery ought to have no great difficulty in achieving his purpose. Let him only move on with "eyes front," avoid the slums, take care not to inquire too nearly as to the needs of the sinful and the forsaken, and his wish will be perfectly fulfilled. Very different was Onesiphorus. Not enough for him to pour out sympathetic platitudes from a distance; he did not wait, but went, giving himself no rest till he had found the lonely man amid Rome's swarming thousands, and held love's cup of cold water to his lips.

So, brethren, the main thing required to make us helpful is not sentiment, but action. The sentiments are usually all right, now and then indeed they are in excess. I have read of a lady whose tenderness of feeling was such that in time of famine she forbade a phrase like "the starving poor" to be used in her presence. No! the chief requisite is not additional emotion, but more willingness to take pains. How little will divert us, often, from some kind plan we have conceived! We resolve to write a letter to some

one who is lonely, to carry a gift to a child, to visit an acquaintance laid up in hospital. To think of it delights us; but then how trifling the hindrance that suffices to wreck the plan! The walk of an extra mile, a few drops of rain, the loss of half an hour's sleep—any one of them will do it. Had the pleasure at stake been ours, we should have smiled at such obstacles; but now we say easily, "After all, it matters little; they will never know". You and I, brethren, are all firmly persuaded of our own radical goodness of heart. Let us apply this test, the pains we take to be kind for Christ's sake, and possibly the result may startle us.

Then besides that, Onesiphorus was not ashamed of Paul; and *that* memory the apostle treasured with a rare depth of gratitude. Evidently he was used to having people ashamed of him. It was all part of being a Christian. But to treat him so never crossed the other's mind. To know St. Paul was the pride of Onesiphorus' life. So far from being ashamed or afraid to be seen in his cell, I have no doubt he grew positively elated over his success in finding him. Some one says: Well, I don't see anything very extraordinary in that. Ashamed of St. Paul! why, the man who felt so might well be ashamed of himself. And yet, when we think of it, was it really quite a matter of course? Remember, St. Paul was not yet a great New Testament character; he was only, as

the vast majority considered, a wandering Jewish fanatic, a person of whom the Roman government and the police had grave suspicions. To be known as his friend was a stigma and a peril. On the surface, no doubt, the situation has undergone a change since then, but perhaps it is a change more in appearance than reality. Touch the nerve of worldliness still, and you find a hatred of Jesus Christ; and if you are going to put yourself, steadily and with conviction, on the side of men who take the will of Jesus Christ as their supreme moral authority, you will discover soon enough, by painful but blessed experience, that the offence of the Cross has not ceased, but merely a little altered its forms. Only it is worth while to bear it—the reward far outweighs the pain—and what a rush of new life and freedom it would bring to many, especially of our younger Christians, had they but the courage to identify themselves outright with some down-trodden but noble cause and be sharers in its coming triumph! Where are the rank and file of the temperance army to be recruited for the next big fight if not from the communion-rolls of our churches? Have we no need, then, to get more iron into our blood? Must we not learn to "dare to be in the right with two or three"? And has not Onesiphorus much to teach us, even across the gulf of nearly two thousand years? Yet he is not without successors now. You have heard of Francis Crossley,

the munificent Christian philanthropist of Manchester; but perhaps you may not know how he many times stood by the street-preachers of the Gospel when they had to run the gauntlet of Northern rowdyism. "Upon one notable occasion," his biographer writes, "when he was on the bench of magistrates, he was called on to take part in the trial of a Salvation Army girl for obstructing the public thoroughfare. When the case was called, Crossley left his seat on the bench, and took his stand by the side of the Army girl in the dock." There is the modern commentary on the words: "He was not ashamed of my chain".

Note, secondly, *how much this kindness meant to Paul.* No one had ever lived more completely human than the apostle to the Gentiles. The desire for friendship became at times with him almost a physical craving. It is not to be imagined that he always lived upon the heights, on the blue altitudes, for example, to which he soars in Colossians or Ephesians. No; there were hours of loneliness and sorrow, when in his dejection he would have given all he had for the voice of a loved friend, and a look from his kindly eyes. So think of the shock of pleasure that came to the solitary captive when one day his cell-door swung back, and in strode this trusty henchman, all the way from Asia. A friend in need is a friend indeed. Months later it makes the old man's heart thrill to think of

all it had meant, and he pours out intercessions for Onesiphorus in this life and the next.

One feels there must have been a peculiar uplift and exhilaration in the Ephesian's presence. He came in that day like a burst of sunshine in November. Do you wonder that the prisoner's heart leapt up to meet him, and that all his days he never could forget what his friend had done? Why, consider what a visit from some people may mean at any time, if only they have caught from Jesus Christ the secret of scattering brightness and hope where they come. In the life of Professor Henry Drummond a letter of Mr. Robert Barbour is quoted which has captured the very fragrance and spirit of such a meeting. He tells how Drummond descended upon him unexpectedly in his Aberdeenshire manse, and together they snatched the rare delight of a walk through the autumn woods, with blue hills and purple moors in the distance. And then the letter ends: "There followed a chat, face to face, and heart to heart, by the study fire, and a solemn moment of prayer. And so the Bird of Paradise spread his wings, and I saw him no more." Though the visitor's coming was so sudden and his flight so swift, it has left a memory and a picture we delight even yet to gaze at; and all this, and far more, the coming of Onesiphorus meant for St. Paul. The tedium of solitude; anxiety for churches over half the world; the sense of desertion,

it may be, when last he faced the cruel Emperor Nero—it was into the midst of these darkening shadows that the brave Ephesian came, with attentive love and the infectious good cheer of Christian faith. Not once only, but again and again he came; "he sought me out diligently, he oft refreshed me".

This, then, is friendship; and friendship only rises to its highest point when the two comrades are followers of Jesus Christ. Some modern writers would persuade us that friendship is a grace of human life which attained the very flower of its perfectness in the old pagan world; whereas Christianity, by claiming the first place in our heart for God, has destroyed something of its innocent and unconscious beauty, and cast a shadow over its joy. Yet is it not clear that precisely the opposite is true? Is it not clear that it is as lit up by the Christian revelation that this dear human custom, friendship, appears in all its depth and preciousness? Who save believers can be certain that their friendship will last for ever? And where can hearts and minds be at one so utterly as those that are at one about God and Christ? Built together on the Rock of Ages, they cherish hopes, interests, convictions, personal ideals, which are fundamentally the same; and this because the same Lord and Master is He by whom they live and in whom they hope to die. It makes them glad and strong to know that they will be always the more

to each other, the closer they draw to Him who is Redeemer and King of both.

Brethren, let me leave this question on the consciences of us all—Do we give as high a place as it deserves to Christian friendship, to intimacies with those who share our trust in Jesus the Son of God? Are there saints whom we ignore because of their obscurity, and worldlings whom we court because of their success? To adapt the familiar saying of Dr. Johnson, do we keep our Christian friendships in repair? Do we take pains in the matter, and seize opportunities of cultivating intimacies that would help us nearer to God and breathe a nobler spirit through our lives? I believe this cardinal subject of the principles on which we choose our friends, and the qualities we seek and admire in them, receives much less attention than it ought to, and that there are few departments of life which the followers of Christ are so content to leave to the influence of mere accident. Too often we drift into companionships without ever a thought as to their power to make us stronger for faith and obedience. But happy we, if in God's mercy we possess a friend like Onesiphorus—one on whom we can reckon in our trouble, who will hold us up when we stumble, and raise us when we fall. If such a friendship is yours, try to be worthy of it, try to take out of it all it holds for you in God's plan. The more precious it becomes, the more clearly

will it speak to you of the Friend of all friends, that sticketh closer even than a brother.

Lastly, note *how St. Paul repaid the other's kindness.* In one word, he prayed for him ; he took his name in love to the throne of God ; and this is the best recompense any of us can make for sympathy or help. If you do a service to a neighbour, he may pay you money for it, or he may do you a like service some day ; yet there are better things than these to be had of human gratitude. St. Paul had now no money wherewith to pay, although some scholars hold him to have once been a wealthy man, but like Peter at the Gate Beautiful he could say : " Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee ". So by his prayers, though poor, he made Onesiphorus rich. Ah ! friends, the prayers of any one are worth having, but especially the prayers of a man of God. If you are wise, you will covet the intercessions of those whose feet often tread that secret path. Says a saint of the seventeenth century, writing to an acquaintance who lived by habit in fellowship with God : " When you have the King's ear, remember me " ; and surely each of us has at least one friend from whom we also might beg this kindness.

And if you covet intercession, be sure that you offer it liberally on behalf of others. You are deep in debt to so many for their care and love ; you are surrounded by so many who are fighting a hard

battle, and whose strength is nearly breaking; you have tempted men among your friends: and what better can you do than bring their case to God, and spread it out before Him? You can ask Him to bless those that have been kind; you can ask Him to protect those that are weak; you can do these things, and if you can, why, then, brethren, you ought to. Be sure you will find that the time and care are never lost, for, as Samuel Rutherford long since put it, "I seldom made an errand to God for another, but I got something for myself".

VII

WHAT THE SPIRIT DOES AND IS

Sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance.—Ephesians i. 13-14.

SOME years ago a book of marked ability was written by a Scottish minister, bearing upon the subject of this text. The author put the question to himself: Where lies the power that keeps Christianity a-going? We find the gospel at work in history, and we see it moving in individual lives. If at times our faith has seemed to be on its death-bed, yet, unlike other religions, it has never failed to surmount these periods of decay or weakness, and to march on with renewed energy. What is the secret of this? In the book I have alluded to the answer was—the Holy Spirit.

Now this may appear to you a little startling. Is it not disproportionate, perhaps even slightly fanatical, to say that the presence and operation of the Spirit is actually the life-giving secret of the Christian religion? Would it not be more correct to hold that the gospel draws its power from the life of Jesus upon earth? Surely the golden age of Christianity

was the three short years of our Lord's ministry? When He walked with men in the corn-fields, or gathered them round Him in the upper room, or spoke in dying accents from the Cross—surely these were the days when heaven and earth met, and God was near to man. For in those days no spiritual intermediary was called for between Christ and those who followed Him. He had them and they had Him in direct fellowship. How could they be in closer union? It was the nearest bond, was it not, that could be imagined, and any later change was bound to be a change for the worse?

Well, all I can now stop to point out is that to think so is flying right in the face of Christ's own teaching. You have only to examine His words carefully, especially near the end, to discern that He was looking forward to something—something great—which was to happen after His death, and more than make up to believers for His departure. That something was the advent of the Spirit. The teaching of the Spirit was to bring clearer light. The indwelling of the Spirit was to breathe a firmer courage. In the power of the Spirit, disciples were to do even greater works than Christ Himself. After the Resurrection it was the same. When the Risen Master stood amongst the disciples in the upper room for the first time, and when He parted from them for the last time, still it was with this promise on His lips

that soon the Spirit would be poured forth, and that, once imparted, He would be to them all that their Lord had been, and more. That was the promise whose fulfilment began with Pentecost. Then the Spirit came like a mighty wind and filled the Church, in an hour not less wonderful than that in which Christ was born or in which He died for the sin of the world.

Can we say sincerely that we appreciate the place Christ thus gave to the Holy Spirit? Do we attach an importance to His work and His power at all in keeping with the striking emphasis of our Lord's declarations on the subject? Are not professing Christians often found to exhibit a curious ignorance as to what the Spirit is, and—even more astonishing—a curious indifference as to what the Spirit does? No doubt we are theoretically convinced that a man can believe on Jesus Christ only as the Spirit evokes and aids his confidence; but is there no tendency to forget altogether the necessity of that aid, and its vital meaning, not for the inception of the Christian life merely, but for its daily continuance? Do we not live far too much as though the Holy Spirit might be dispensed with, and we grow Christlike, somehow, by the natural gravitation and development of character? If that be so, it is well to remind ourselves that holy life and noble deeds, in the Bible sense of these phrases, flow only from one fountain,

and that the communication of the Spirit of the holy God to the souls He has created and redeemed. Moreover, that communication and possession are not the prerogative merely of a select few, bestowed far on in the Christian experience as the reward of steadfast loyalty. As Jesus tells us in the Gospel of St. John, not once only, but over and over again, the Spirit is *the* gift of God, granted freely, granted to all who seek it; but also entirely essential to raise in us what is low and illumine what is dark.

But some one may ask: What is meant by the presence of the Spirit; how can it be put in terms that I can experience and realise now and here? Well, to that question two different replies are possible. You may reply to it in detail, or you may reply to it compendiously. In the one case, we have to think of the particular dispositions, or attitudes, or graces of character which the Spirit calls into existence; and these a beautiful verse of St. Paul details in another place: "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance". Just as, when you see a corn-stalk waving in the field you know that beneath it, out of sight, there is a germinating, multiplying source of life and fruitfulness, so in the heart where love and joy and peace flourish, there must of necessity be the Spirit's hidden seed. On the other hand, you may state the matter more comprehensively by saying

that the Spirit is that Divine personal influence that brings Christ into the heart, and seats Him there. He is the advocate and agent of the Redeemer, always more than half-concealed behind Him for whom He pleads and whose person He glorifies. "He shall take of Mine," said Christ, "and shall declare it unto you."

It is noteworthy that in the text the Spirit is described as the Spirit of promise. No one can say when that promise was first given. God has been implicitly promising His Spirit ever since the world began. Go back to the first recorded dealings of heaven with earth; go far and beyond that into the dim backward and abysm of time, and everywhere, always, you will find something in God, and in God's attitude towards man, that pointed forward to, and prophesied, the power and gladness brought to the disciples of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The music of the promise meets us again and again in Scripture. There is the great prophecy of the New Covenant in Jeremiah; there is the majestic prediction in Joel quoted by St. Peter on the day of Pentecost; while in the New Testament there are chapters in the Gospel of St. John where, if you were to cut out all those passages which speak of the Spirit's coming and His work, little would be left. All these promises of a faithful God have been fulfilled, and are being fulfilled this very hour. They are for us, not

less than for those who heard them at the first. To you and me and all believing men is this grace given that we should have dwelling in us the Spirit of God and Christ.

Let me now speak to you briefly about the two figures under which the Holy Spirit is represented in the words I have chosen. There are the two ideas or descriptions—the Spirit as a *seal* and the Spirit as an *earnest*.

1. A seal. Now a seal is that with which an article is stamped to show its owner. So when God puts His seal upon us, it is to mark us as belonging properly to Him. It is by the impress of His Spirit that "the Lord knoweth them that are His". That impress is not ours by nature, still less by happy accident; it has to be placed upon us, and it has to be received by faith. The die comes down, and leaves its stamp on the softened wax, or melted gold, or moist clay; and afterwards they bear that likeness because they were prepared to receive it. Just so, when the love of God in Christ gets into a man's heart, and melts him down in contrition and gratitude, the Spirit descends on his life, and henceforward it bears at least the rudiments of the higher image. Different souls, of course, take different parts of the impression with varied clearness. One will exhibit a Christlike love; another will burn and blaze with fearless devotion; a third will reveal a

deep delight in spiritual knowledge. But, however individual parts may vary, the general outline is fixed there once for all, as the basis of that which is to follow; and it is the task of prayer, self-denial, and hard work to fill up the initial sketch, and bring out each feature in the needed balance and proportion.

Here then we have the purpose of a seal—to make the ownership of an article recognisable. That raises the further question, recognisable by whom? If we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, who will know it? Well, for one thing, we ourselves shall know it. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." There is such a thing as the inward unfaltering testimony assuring us that, however unworthy, we belong to God. He will not leave His people in suspense for ever as to life's great issues. He has means and ways of satisfying our longing for certainty; He has proofs which can be furnished to the inward consciousness, bringing all our doubts to rest. You know whether your lives have been touched by a higher power; you know whether the love of Jesus Christ, living and dying, has caught and filled your heart; you know whether you have been lifted in any measure out of the life of self into the life of God. Ask yourself if there are experiences and impulses in your being which have not so much risen

up out of the depths of your own nature as come down upon you from above, impulses leading you to obey One who has loved and saved you, inspiring you to show forth His praise and make His name glorious, experiences that satisfy the immortal thirst of your souls, and gladden you with a gladness that leaves no bitter taste behind. If these things are in you, with the results I have described, then be sure it is the Spirit's work. He only does such wondrous things. That is the impress of His operation, plainly traceable by your own eyes.

Then again, His presence will be recognisable by others. Go back for a moment to the figure employed by Christ in His interview with Nicodemus. He said then, you recollect, that the action of the Spirit on a human life resembles the blowing of the wind. Now there is much about the wind which is mysterious, and which even science has not wholly mastered; but when you go out in a breeze there is one thing as to which you have not the least uncertainty; and that is whether or no it is blowing. The sensations produced by it, the results left in its track, are unmistakable. So when the Spirit moves and swells in the lives of men, filling all the sails and urging onwards, other men can see it. It has manifestations that tell their own tale. Let it once get inside a man's heart, and it cannot be hid. When men watch a hot, passionate nature learning the

gentleness and courtesy of Jesus; or the moral coward putting on the armour of God and fighting his battles fearlessly; or the grasping and covetous conquering the lust of money, and sharing it liberally with others; or the implacable and unforgiving granting pardon to a neighbour, and asking it in turn, then they know by instinct that such things point to some vast impelling force. Grapes are not to be gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles. And whatever name the onlookers may give it, whatever theories they may indulge as to how it got there, they perceive somehow that its origin is holy and that it is of God. A Christian of the New Testament pattern is as noticeable by his fellows as a white man among black men, or a civilised man among savages.

Furthermore, the seal is a seal for God Himself. Its very first impression marks the soul as His, redeemed at a great cost, and now appropriated for His own possession. To that, however, you have to add the care His love expends in later days to cut the stamp deeper, to work the image of Christ into the character so indelibly that it stays there, and no rain-storms of temptation or pain or death will ever wash it out. Do you not feel there must be joy for God in sealing as His own these human lives—lives so individual, so precious, that Jesus said any one of them was worth more than the whole world? The

ancient story tells how when creation had been finished, God saw everything He had made, and behold, it was very good; but, ah! that deep creative joy in the morning twilight of the world was but a faint premonition of the diviner joy of the new creation, when the Father for ever claims and authenticates as His own those who were dead and are alive again, that which was lost and is found. Britain puts a garrison into her valued frontier positions, the stronger the more she values them; and just so, the presence of God's Spirit, come down to garrison and keep our hearts, betokens how great store He sets by even the least and frailest life. And when the day comes on which the judgment is set, and the books opened, and each soul by the laws of the spiritual universe goes to its own place, what the Father will seek for, and rejoice to find, will be just this seal of His own Spirit, imprinted by His own hand long before in the days of earth. Tell me, brethren, will you have that mark upon you when it is sought for? When God comes, to try, and sift, and gather in, how will you meet His eye? Will you have that signet-mark, set firm and fast on your soul by His grace in Jesus Christ, and by His faithfulness kept clear and keen to the end?

2. An earnest. The Greek word here translated "earnest" is a very interesting and suggestive word, with a history behind it. It was carried about

by the old Phenician traders; it occurs in Genesis, as well as in Greek and Roman literature, for the idea is familiar everywhere. An "earnest" in common speech is simply the first instalment paid over as a pledge that the rest will follow. Servants get their "arles," we say in Scotland, on engagement; and "earnest" is just "arles". Sometimes, when Romans sold an estate, a turf or sod cut from it was handed to the buyer as a specimen portion of the whole, which is a vividly tangible illustration of the same notion. So, wherever an earnest is given, these two things are implied—more will follow, and what follows will be essentially the same in kind.

You see that a principle is here which operates far beyond the limits of religion. Life is full of earnests in this sense. Life is full of experiences whose meaning, whose value, lies not merely in what they are at the time, but even more in what they promise and, as it were, inaugurate. They point on to a wider inheritance, the same yet richer, that is coming some day. They have the very fragrance and colour of the land we have not yet reached; in them we grasp and hold the future by prophecy. Here is a lad, for example, who has entered on his father's business, and takes his work seriously. He masters the processes and secrets of the trade; he spends thought and imagination on new openings and new

methods; and soon he wins confidence. One day he is put in charge of a smaller workshop; nothing very great, perhaps, but what does it mean? What does it give him by anticipation? It is the earnest of an inheritance, a promise of the time when he will be made a full partner, with all the power and respect involved in that. So I might go round the full circle of human experience—love, learning, art, duty. Everywhere for the true man there are, in the early days of service, forerunners and foretokens of something better still to come, promises which are themselves partial possessions and yet speak of a possession fuller and more perfect still.

So too it is, in the highest sphere, with those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. They also have an earnest; they have it in their heart, shining out into their lives; and it is the presence of the Spirit. And like other earnests, these two qualities distinguish it that it furnishes a certainty of that which is coming, and reveals its character. First, it speaks with assurance of the future. An earnest that was an earnest of nothing would be a poor mockery, with no more significance than one half of a clasp, or the broken segment of a noble arch. And if God has been enabling you to walk in fellowship with Himself; if He has been making prayer a strength and a delight to you; if He has been changing your conceptions of things and their values down to the very bottom, so

that you esteem what is Christlike and eternal and despise the low and base and mean; if the thought of God's love and God's perfect holiness have become a satisfaction and refreshment until you could not bear to live without Him—that is itself the presence of His Spirit within you, and you may be sure that the blessedness of it is not going to stop when you leave this world. God would not put you off with an inheritance like that. He will not train you to the enjoyment of His love and communion, in order to rob you of it at the last. Neither love nor joy nor peace, which are the Spirit's choicest fruits, can ripen fully amid the frosts and scanty sunshine of a world like this; but never would they be permitted by our Father to attain even their present beauty or strength, unless He had meant to train them to a complete expansion somewhere else. Every believer has the assurance in his own heart that these things are so. And thus the Spirit is a Spirit of promise in this sense also, that its light shines across the black gulf of death, and reveals the heritage beyond.

Then besides that, our present experience supplies an index to the quality and character of that which is to come. You cannot judge of the magnitude of an object from a pattern, but you can judge of its nature. Even so, though "eye had not seen, nor ear heard, the things that God hath prepared for them

that love Him," yet in faith we know that a world, a life, a being is in front of us which has for its inward content just the perfected fulness of the same Spirit that here is ours to purify and sustain. One glancing sunbeam, shot over a cloud, tells on the darkest day what kind of glory is up there above the mists; and the faintest light in a sinner's heart, evoked by the Spirit's action and kindled by the love of Jesus Christ, foretells by its intrinsic character what God has yet in store for him. Goodness, patience, kindness, pity, love—they will be the same in heaven as on earth, only consummated; and there as here they will take their glory from the Lord Jesus Christ. If we cannot forecast the particulars of that eternal life, yet we can foretaste, in the Spirit's consecrating presence, its nobleness and its bliss.

If these things are so, brethren, what are we to say about ourselves? Is there anything resembling this operation of the Spirit in our lives; and even if there is, have we no need to deplore the difference between what we might be and what we are? Let us beware of entangling our minds in puzzles as to the precise nature of the Spirit, to the neglect, it may be, of matters greatly more important. As it has been put, the question asked in the New Testament is not, Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? but rather, Did ye *receive* the Holy Spirit when ye believed? For us

the central certainty is that God grants the Spirit freely, like all His gifts, and that whoso asks, obtains. Let us ask, and wait upon Him, till we hear the very voice of Jesus, breathing on us and saying, as once of old, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost".

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VIII

A STORY OF CONVERSION

And he arose and went; and, behold, a man of Ethiopia.—Acts viii. 27.

In the early chapters of this book we see the good news of Christ radiating out from Jerusalem, like the widening ripples on a pool into which you cast a stone. A fit motto for the whole marvellously rapid development is the exclamation of the stupefied crowd on the day of Pentecost: "We hear the mighty works of God, every man in our own language wherein we were born". Philip the deacon was one of the most active evangelists. Only one or two scenes in his obedient and strenuous career find a place in the panorama of Acts; but these make it clear that he was a man of whom, had there been space enough, the New Testament might well have told us a great deal more.

For a man who loves his business there is always work in plenty; hence on the arrival of Peter and John to take up the leadership in Samaria, Philip set out for a new field. Travelling directly south, and striking the Gaza road near the desert, he reached the

post assigned him. And there he waited. Presently down the highway came the royal treasurer of Ethiopia, a numerous retinue most likely in his train; and, as he drew near, Philip was made inwardly aware that his business was with this stranger. Possibly he thought it odd at first that he should have been hurried away from a wonderful revival in Samaria, merely to talk to one man; but, however that may be, at least his faith was too loyal and too robust to ask questions, or to disobey orders because they had rather a quixotic look. So, this morning, let me offer a few simple and unelaborated observations on this interview, which turned the Gaza road into a spot of happy memory for one brave heart to the very end of time.

I like the hopefulness of Philip, as he advances to his new task. Remember, he had just been imposed upon by a bad man at Samaria, when Simon the Sorcerer, a kind of false Christ, had tried to buy the Holy Spirit. That was a bitterly disappointing case, yet Philip went on evangelising just the same. He would not throw up his mission in disgust, because Simon had turned out a sham; here he is, a few days later, guiding an earnest man to the Redeemer. One meets persons occasionally who have never been able to get over some glaring instance of hypocrisy in a professing Christian. For the remainder of their life it forms the favourite arrow in their quiver. They

produce the well-worn anecdote in season and out, and make it the basis of extremely dismal conclusions as to the sincerity and trustworthiness of Christians as a body. Now in this there is very little sense. The merchant who has been defrauded once does not feel called upon to suspect each new customer till he proves himself honest. Now and then we have a wet summer, but it is only foolish persons who go about saying that the fine old-fashioned seasons are gone for ever. An exception is exceptional. This or that instance of religious inconsistency counts for one, but it counts for no more than one. If it makes a great noise, that is because it is so unusual. When a railway accident happens, the papers are full of it, and nervous people vow they will never set foot in a train again; yet thousands of trains are running safely all the time. So we ought not to allow an isolated case of religious breakdown, which certainly may occur, to bulk too largely in our thoughts. Consider rather the unnumbered multitudes whose lives from day to day are being made beautiful through faith in the Son of God. Whatsoever things are true, honourable, lovely, and of good report—think on these things.

Now the eunuch for whose help Philip had come was seeking God. He was not by birth a member of the Jewish race; but by choice he had become, so to speak, an associate-member; or, in more technical

language, a proselyte. He had travelled over a thousand miles to worship at Jerusalem; a distance people do not come to church unless they are very much in earnest. Then he had turned home again, perhaps a little disappointed, anyhow with his mind in something of a maze. Possibly he had heard stray rumours about a certain Jesus, crucified a few months earlier, whose followers were making a great stir by persistently claiming that He had risen from the dead. But the stories were far from clear. And now on his way home he held open before him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and was reading it attentively. In the circumstances nothing was more natural than for Philip, the lonely traveller, to join the larger caravan; and, as he moved close up to the chariot, he heard the treasurer reading—reading aloud, as the Eastern way is—reading that deep and moving lyric of vicarious sorrow, the fifty-third chapter, which delineates the sufferings of the Servant of the Lord. How the scene stands out!—the patient earnest-faced reader, with lines of perplexity on his brow, as he cons the verses over and over again; and near by, keeping pace with the wheels, biding his time, Philip, the man of wise counsel and big heart, Christ's true preacher and ambassador.

Soon the tones of mystification in the reader's voice grew more appealing, and very quietly and unobtrusively Philip threw in a question that really meant, "You don't understand what you are reading, do you?"

Most people resent the faintest allusion to their ignorance, even though prompted by the kindliest motives; but this man was too much in earnest for affectations of that sort. You are powerless to help the man who will not let you near him. And to get past the guard of human pride is sometimes nearly impossible. But, as many of you know, in every man's search for God a point arrives at which he can only stop, and drop his hands, and get down on his knees, confessing that he has come to the end of all his knowledge, and that if there is to be hope for him any longer the guiding light must be poured down into his soul by God's own unbought love and mercy.

Philip's question drew a frank, modest answer; and thereupon, as one perceives, a kind of sudden friendship sprang up between the two men. Each felt that the other was the man he needed. The seeking soul longed for a straightforward preacher, and the preacher longed for a seeking soul. So, when Philip had mounted up beside the other, they got to work instantly on the great question of the hour. Mark, though it seems a very minor detail, the Ethiopian did not stop his chariot for a confabulation at the way-side. His furlough was over; duty was summoning him back to his post without delay; and not even religious anxiety would have justified him in slackening speed. God, be very sure, comes nearer to no man for the neglect of plain obligations. People

who gain time for religious meetings by scamping responsibilities and shuffling through home duties, may gain the stimulus of excited minds and convulsed emotions, but not the blessing of a closer fellowship with God. It is only as we are faithful to the good we know that God leads us further into knowledge of Himself.

One thing strikes me at this point in the story. It is that the eunuch had no sooner got Philip seated at his side, than he began to ply him with questions about salvation. How afraid we all are of religious talk! How we pride ourselves on our reserve, and how ready we are to freeze up any warm, eager soul who is not quite so taciturn as we are! There was an Indian gentleman who once came to this country because he had been filled with an insatiable desire to learn all he could about immortality, and he supposed people in England could tell him something. He went to London, and to his neighbour at table one evening he said: "I should like to know what you think about immortality". He received the answer, "Ah! in this country we don't talk about these subjects at dinner"; and that was the end. I wonder what you would or could say, if at any time some one who really meant it were to ask you, "What must I do to be saved?" Could you put the matter in a few plain words? Could you speak as one man to another? And could you speak in the tone of one

who is passing on the Gospel that has first redeemed himself?

As we have seen, it was the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah that Philip made his text that day. It is one of the holiest spots in all the Bible, at which a great multitude of souls have found God. We, as we read it, feel the wondrous tenderness and power with which it portrays Christ's sacrifice, and all the virtue of His redeeming sympathy. Just then, the Ethiopian knew nothing of all that; yet he too was melted and subdued by the picture of the Man of Sorrows. He read once more the description of the great Sin-bearer —the verses in which it is clearly predicated of Him that His greatness is the result of His being, not the founder of a new school of thought, or the leader of a social reformation, nor even possessed of personal saintliness, but of His being a Sufferer. And in view of this description, so moving in its mystery, he asked the question, going right to the heart of things: Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Yes; *the* question for religious faith, the question best worth asking, and the answer to which answers at the same time all the others, is just that which confronts us here: Who is the Bearer of human sin?

It was a great Gospel text; none better could have offered, in all the Old Testament; and Philip was not the man to miss the opportunity. So he took the other where he found him, and from that spot led him

on. No Christian worker can miss the lesson. Accept people just where they are; and seek the path that leads to Christ precisely from where they stand. You may find it hard to place yourself at the right point of view, but the effort is worth while. If you are to help the man who needs you, you must lay your mind close to his. You must learn to speak his language, and see his difficulties through his eyes. "To the Jews," said Paul, the great soul-winner, "I became as a Jew, that I might gain some." No wise person, for example, would dream of delivering quite the same message in an ordinary church and at the corner of a slum-street. The staple of his thought, no doubt, would be precisely the same; but he would serve it up in another dish and with other accompaniments. And it would be foolish to preach a doctrinal sermon to the very young, but none the less we may tell them the Gospel in a story. And so it is in our mission-work, and Sunday-school teaching, and fireside care for the minds and hearts of children. Let us speak to them in terms which their years and their experience will interpret, trusting to the good Spirit of God to be His own expositor when our words have died away.

"Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." If only we had the notes of that sermon, delivered with a chariot for pulpit, and to an audience of one, and

filled, as we shall see, with such persuasive power! What were Philip's arguments and illustrations and appeals? How did he set Jesus livingly and compellingly before this man, who an hour ago had heard no more than His name, and perhaps not even that? Well, I think he would tell him first of the Resurrection; then, as the background of that, snatches from the story of Christ's life, and some of His most gracious parables, and perhaps a few of His best remembered sayings—such as this: "Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy-laden"; or this: "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost". Yet whatever else he told him, he would inevitably tell him of the Cross. With such a text he could not help that, and Philip was the last man that would wish to help it. No preacher can be true to the Word and leave out the Cross. No preacher can leave out the Cross who would be faithful to man's need, or just to his frailty, or compassionate to the wounds of conscience. And rest assured that if Philip *had* kept silence about Calvary—its meaning, its issues, its glory—then the gleam of interest would soon have faded from the hearer's eyes, and his eager face have lost its quiver of expectancy. But so it was that by the strong pleading of the outward voice, and the gracious power of the Spirit inwardly, the Ethiopian was brought to look to the Crucified, to desire Him, to reach out empty hands of longing after Him;

until, as the chariot rolled on its unconscious way, then and there he yielded himself to the new constraining Presence, and began to love a Saviour he had never seen.

Brethren, if some day you should be asked what conversion is, here you have a plain answer ready to your hand. Ask your questioner to read the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and he will find the answer given in actual life. Remind him, too, that if he wishes to have an illustrative commentary on the story, it is being re-acted over and over again in churches and missions everywhere. Christ is still being found by men in just this way. Wherever men are changed in such a manner that only Divine power can explain it; wherever men cross the line that severs Christ from sin, and choose their part with Him for ever—there conversion has come to pass. There may be no tumult or distress of soul, or, on the other hand, there may be long grief and pain; it is not for us to make rules or lay down conditions. To produce such conversions, in any case, is one main reason for the existence of the Christian Church. And those who talk, sometimes a little thoughtlessly, and without reference to the nature of the human mind, as if these radical and sudden changes were dubious, or abnormal, or unintelligible, would do well to inquire whether they have any real belief in the power and presence of the Risen Lord.

On the swift conversion followed, as swiftly, an eager confession of new faith. For acts of trust have sequels. Everywhere in that day, of course, as in heathenism still, the obvious and natural mode in which a man could signify his personal belief in Jesus was an open and deliberate submission to the rite of baptism. None of the elements of publicity were lacking now; one can see the officers and servants of the retinue crowding round to watch and comment and remember. In some pool or streamlet by the wayside, then, the sacrament took place, and the new disciple took the words of Christian confession on his lips. Let us not miss the significance of the fact that all was done with such openness. Who could say that the act would not be reported against him in the homeland, and used by an enemy for his hurt? Yet he was willing to take the risk of it, gladly accepting the ventures which are inseparable from loyalty; and how much strength his faith and purpose would draw from that brave deed of confession one can dimly guess. It would nerve his arm thus to hear his own voice lifted in solemn avowal; it always does. Until you are personally committed to Christian faith, your religious aspirations are very likely to remain feeble and ineffective. It is when you have crossed the river, and burnt your boats behind you, that God makes you strong through confidence in His power, and men

see in your eyes the light of a fire that glows within. And just as a fire needs air if it is to burn, and will go black out if you cover it up, so concealed religion is extremely apt to become extinct religion, and the unexpressed conviction dies in silence.

Then, when they were come up out of the water, "the eunuch went on his way rejoicing". Nothing in the wonderful story is more amazing. *Rejoicing*—what was there to rejoice about? He was going back to a dark savage land, the only Christian in the country; he was going back to spiritual isolation and into the midst of fierce temptations to apostacy; he was going back, quite probably, to persecution and to death. He had only a few stray leaves of the Old Testament; he knew very little of Christian truth; and even Philip, who had led him to God, was now called away. Yet he went on his way "rejoicing"; and perhaps in some little wonder we ask the reason why.

Well, it is not so very difficult to understand, is it, after all? He had found Jesus Christ, and realised Christ's personal love for him; and depend upon it, whatever else he understood of Christian doctrine, he knew this, that Christ had become his inseparable companion for ever and for ever. Far away in distant Ethiopia he would never feel forsaken or bewildered any more, for the great secret was now his. That touch on the hem of Jesus's garment had

made him whole. And therefore, as he went his way back into the heathen darkness, perhaps to meet a cruel fate, it was with a soul made brave and glad by the presence that solves all difficulties and satisfies all hearts.

So, friends, the Christian life can subsist on astonishingly little knowledge, if only that knowledge be of the right stamp. A few grains of radium, they tell us, will illumine a whole apartment; and in like manner the clear assurance that Christ is Redeemer, and that He is mine, is enough to make all thought and feeling bright. Get that first condition right, and all else you long for will come in due season. Remember only that Christ is with you and in you and above you, in His power and His abiding peace, and then, if duty calls you, you can venture safely anywhere. God can make His own secure. "They shall take up serpents," the old promise ran; "they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them."

IX

LOT'S WIFE

Remember Lot's wife.—Luke xvii. 32.

HALF the impressiveness of this brief, sharp sentence lies in its immediate context. Christ used it to inculcate—what? He is speaking, you observe, of the time and manner in which He will come again; whether that signifies the end of the world or the destruction of Jerusalem. In either case He predicts that the great day will arrive when men are least expecting it, because sunk in their ordinary occupations, eating, drinking, buying, selling, marrying and being given in marriage. Such would be the danger that wise men would instantly escape for their lives. The man on the housetop or in the field ought not even to make a dash to save his property, but flee straightway to the hills. Christ is speaking in pictures, no doubt, but pictures often have a quite definite meaning; and here the one thing certain is that they stand for stupendous facts.

Now whatever men might do at other times, a crisis of this unheard-of character would surely sting

them into promptitude. Delay would then be madness. Nothing except instant and decisive action is of any use when the house is burning, and the roof just going to fall in. And yet, as He looked down the years, Christ saw that a loud warning was necessary against infirmity of purpose even in that thrilling hour. In the very midst of the crash of fate, some men would be tempted to look back. So, in three words, He points in Old Testament story to the folly of this woman, and the doom that fell on her after she had left the burning city. I need not dwell on the particulars. Both in Genesis and here the light is focussed on that one point, that she turned and looked back, with a mixture of regret and disobedience, and so proved herself utterly hopeless. Although the city and its corruptions lay under that pitiless rain of fire, yet she was loth to go. It was cruel to bid it all farewell. That one short chapter ending in darkness makes up the story. And Christ takes her experience—her act and her swift fate—and uses it to caution the irresolute. See how men and women can vacillate, He says; see how they loiter when angels would drag them out of ruin. Remember Lot's wife; whosoever shall seek to gain his life shall lose it.

This picture, then, etched so sharply on the Bible page, may well help to illustrate for us truths that should be burned into our minds and our memories.

Note, first, that *God saves all He can.* For Lot was not saved alone, in mercy that overlooked all others beside. His wife's deliverance had been cared for too, and measures taken to secure her with the rest. One of the angels clasped her hand and drew her out of the conflagration by main force. Almost against her will she was hurried so far out of danger, and the mountain-road, with its hastening fugitives, stretched out clear before her, when, in that one glance behind, her incurably corrupt nature came out, and the stroke fell.

In other words, she was nearly saved, and would have been wholly saved had that heavenly rescue-party had their will. That teaches a lesson worth pondering. You and I look out into the great future, sometimes, asking ourselves hard questions about the eternal destiny of men; but, however eager our forward gaze, we return always at last perforce to this conviction, that for us to venture to predict the lot of any specific individual is an utterly hopeless undertaking. Over that God has drawn a veil, for good reasons of His own. It is not for us to determine the merits of a fellow-sinner. As Mr. Gladstone once put it—and on such a point his judgment was unerring—"Nothing grows upon me so much with lengthening life as the sense of the difficulties, or rather the impossibilities, with which we are beset whenever we attempt to take to ourselves the func-

tions of the Eternal Judge, and to form any accurate idea of relative merit and demerit, good and evil" in others. That, indeed, is the one fixed point in our ignorance; but it is balanced, and more than compensated for, by another fixed certainty, which comes right out of this old story and many another Scripture; namely, that no one will be lost at the end who is willing to be saved. God would give the whole world to redeem any one of His children. Already he has given more, immeasurably more, than the whole world, when He freely delivered up His Son for us all, and bought us at a great price.

That is one side of the truth; and on the other I can appeal to His gracious dealings with us all. Year in, year out, He is seeking us in a thousand ways. He plants the Cross before us in its moving power; He flashes the horror of evil in upon our consciences; He stirs us by the ennobling example of Christ-like men, and kindles deep hopes and longings as to the happiness and victorious power that faith will bring. Can you imagine any expedient God might have used which He has not used in fact; and are there not a multitude of other incentives than those I have mentioned—for no catalogue can be exhaustive—of which each of us has felt the urgency and the appeal in our own heart?

And what shall we say in view of all that? Surely

this, that if we pass by His messages, deaf to their pleading, or scornful of their arguments, the burden will not lie with Him. His hands are clean, even if His love is wounded. God saves all He can; He would not be our Father if He did not. He will take your hand, too, if you will let Him, and guide your stumbling feet into that safety which you require and He can give. He is our refuge, and by faith we can take Him for hiding-place, and so dwell in a fortress where no storms can enter. So whatever your past contains—whether attainments that tempt your pride or evil that sickens you with shame—forget it, forget all that is behind, and refuse at all hazards to look back. Keep your face towards Christ's love, and escape swiftly to Him for life and blessedness.

Note, secondly, *how men hanker after old sins.* That was the fatal flaw in this instance; and how frequently it shadows lives full of promise in the Bible! Recall some of the more prominent examples. Rachel becomes the wife of Jacob, and like him engages thereby to worship the one true God; but when she leaves her home the old idols are packed away in the baggage. The Israelites acclaim Moses as leader, and promise obedience, and set out eagerly for the desert; but the Red Sea is hardly out of sight before they are weeping for the flesh-pots of Egypt, and ready to stone their deliverer. And when

we cross over to the New Testament, there is the career of Demas—first feeling the strange attraction of the Gospel and waiting upon St. Paul as a familiar friend, then recaptured by the old fascination and plunging back into the world. It is a weakness all too common, this craving lust for earlier self-indulgence; and it suggests that Christ spoke to every human soul when He uttered the solemn words: No man, putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

Ask yourself now whether you know anything about this half-hearted way of dealing with sin. No temptation is more common, or more insinuating, than the notion that we must not commit a particular sin, but yet may safely think about it, and let our mind dwell on the pleasure it once gave us. At times the situation is slightly different from that, though similar enough in results. Some personal habit is harming our life, impeding or even poisoning our fellowship with God; we condemn it, only not severely enough to break with it once for all. Or there is a special department of life—our business, our reading, our imagination—which we have never yet subdued to Christ's authority, with a fault in it which we permit to fester in our character like a running sore. Or there is some friendship, some alluring intimacy, which we know ought either to have its tone altered radically or be put a stop to; yet the need

ful word is left unspoken. Now that, or other things like that, when found in a Christian man, is to be moving slowly out of the City of Destruction and casting wistful looks behind. We see the beauty of the higher, and approve it, yet we hunger for the old sweetness of lower things. The tree of evil shall not be cut down to the ground, if only that one root be spared.

But let us distinguish here, and avoid anything like injustice. I am not speaking of a sin we are honestly fighting and doing our best to overcome. There may be such sin in a Christian life, grievous and humiliating, yet terribly persistent. Say the weakness of evil temper—a far graver and more guilty business than many people imagine who think it very hard that their neighbours should, as they say, constantly 'provoke them' into ill-nature. Still, owing to natural disposition that sin may beset a Christian man to his bitter grief, and now and then take him by surprise in spite of prayer and vigilance. Only, the difference is that the man I have in my mind is saddened, not gladdened, by his sin. It is hateful and repulsive to him; more than that, he has made a covenant with God to destroy it, and he knows thankfully, deep down in his heart, that some day it will veritably be destroyed. And if, to use a military figure, he is ever found in the camp of the enemy, it is because he has been entrapped and taken

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prisoner, not because he has deserted and gone over to the other side.

On the other hand, the man aimed at in the text is one who looks back on sin kindly, remembering its charm, and longing to enjoy it just once more. Lot's wife had fled out of the blazing streets with the others, but her heart stayed behind, and at last it tugged so hard that she could go no farther. So some evil thing may be clung to and loved even in a certain kind of religious life. Long after the Israelites got into Canaan, and settled down, Jerusalem still remained in the hands of the old natives, a perpetual centre of disorder and mischief all around, until at last David put his heel upon the viper's head and crushed it. In the same way, one darling sin, snugly housed at the centre of our being, and often looked at and handled desiringly, will spread feebleness and disease through the whole life. It does not need to be a glaring wrong, about which people make a public outcry; but however small, if we cling to it with a silent tenacious defiance of God's will, it can arrest the progress of the Christian character, and eat out the heart of it until the hollow shell is only a ghastly hypocrisy. Sometimes in a wine-cask there is an unsuspected growth of fungus, that sucks up the liquor like a sponge, until no wine is left, but only a foul growth. Just so men may go on, hiding from themselves the fact that cherished sin is absorbing the main in-

terest of their life, and diverting thought and attention and love from Jesus Christ.

That looks as if it were very difficult—so to deceive one's own heart—but it is not so difficult after all. We know far too little of ourselves, and of the spiritual processes going on deep down within us, chiefly because we never care to know much. Besides, we find it very hard to think evil of ourselves. Conscience may be soothed to slumber, or bribed not to speak. If only we keep up that attitude of ignoring dangerous symptoms, it may happen ultimately that we move about the world unconscious of a mortal disease, which every one else sees in our face. Moreover, the love of sin can become a fierce tiger-like appetite, that will take no refusal. A famous doctor used to speak of a man who came to him once or twice about his eyes. On the first visit, the physician questioned him as to his drinking habits, and on the second told him that unless he became an abstainer instantly he would be blind in six months. The man passed his hand over his face, walked to the window, and was heard to whisper, as he looked out over the garden, "Then farewell, sweet light". What folly to palter with evil that can so bind men in chains!

So, brethren, let me lay this question very near your conscience, as I would strive to do to my own. Are we knowingly keeping a place in our lives for

acknowledged sin? Are we making terms with it, or arranging to gratify it now and then, and desisting from the effort to cast it out provided only it is not too obtrusive, and keeps well in the background? Are we filling our imagination longingly with evil we say we have forsaken? Has the fault been rooted up as well as pruned away? Unless it has, our religion will be very apt to show a strain of double-mindedness, and life so divided in interest between Christ and sin will come to little either in service or attainment. God lays no harsh requirements on us, yet He does ask for sincerity. "Thou desirest truth in the inward parts."

Lastly, note *how sin can be committed in desire.* At first sight, perhaps, one might suppose this woman had been dealt with very hardly; and we are tempted to say that the punishment was out of all proportion to the crime. But, if we feel that, it is because we fail to realise all that her longing glance implied. It was a clear proof that, if she could, she would have turned back to her old haunts; and that, indeed, so far as will and choice were concerned, she had turned back already. So there are instances where God cannot but take the will for the deed.

There is an incident in the New Testament, so minor that many people scarcely notice it, which illustrates the same point. Do you remember what Christ said to the traitor on that last night, just

before giving him the sop? "That thou doest, do quickly." Why that word *doest*, in the present tense, with reference to a crime as yet uncommitted? Why does Christ thus take the sin for granted? Because He saw that in Judas's soul the die was cast, the action signed and sealed by deliberate open-eyed volition. If by some strange providence Judas had fallen dead ere he reached the street, the guilt of that sin already determined on would nevertheless have been his all the same.

Not that for a moment I deny the chasm which, thank God, lies between thought and deed. You and I have often had cause to bless His name that the two things are not identical; that one may have dallied with the thought of evil, as it were furtively and in secret, and yet be restrained from perpetrating it. We can recollect occasions, it may be, when only God's mercy held us back. Had we put forth our hand, had the poison entered our blood, had the fire reached the powder; who can tell what might have been the end, or where we should have been to-day? Never listen to the tempter's voice whispering that since in fancy you have dwelt longingly on the sinful deed, you may as well go further and commit it actually; that your guilt is already so great, it matters little now what more you do. That is a vile and devilish falsehood; cast it out of your mind with fear and loathing.

But it is altogether another question when, as in the case referred to in my text, we choose to act wrongly, and are only prevented by external circumstances. Once the mind has been made up finally, and the preparations are in order, then, after that, I say the sin is as good as committed, in God's sight and so far as our character is concerned. From that point of view, the circumstance that the secret desire never got itself translated into act may be very unimportant. For remember what makes a man; not the movements of his hands and feet merely, not the deeds we see, but the interior volitions and desires, the longings, good or bad, to which he yields himself up, and with which he identifies his will. So the principle meets us here squarely that all conduct and morality, all goodness and badness, have their fountains in the inner life, and that that spring must be kept pure if the outflowing stream is not to be defiled. And this again reminds us (does it not?) that no force or influence which remains outside of a man, and is only mechanically applied, can ever make him the person he ought to be, or save him from the haunting treachery of his own worse nature. The Bible's message tells of the only cure of the weakness. Let us get Christ into our heart, by going to His Cross for cleansing and to His Spirit for restraint; let us thus get His will to become our will and His thoughts our thoughts, and we shall have learned

the true plan by which the living spring of conduct will be made and kept pure, and sin will be abhorred.

Somewhere, surely, round about this evening's subject lies the secret of the unsatisfactory religious lives that are so familiar in our Christian churches. There must be a reason why many people are content to shuffle through their responsibilities to God so imperfectly; and in nine cases out of ten, beyond all question, it is their half-hearted attitude to sin. They linger and debate when immediate flight is the only policy. They stop, and dream of lost delights, when the flames are sweeping up on the wind. Among professing Christians there are comparatively few, probably, whose religion is undermined by gross or outrageous vices; but who can tell the number whose spiritual life is arrested, and all but destroyed, by the creeping paralysis of indecision? Therefore the only safety of the sinner is in flight, and the strongest inducement to flee is a clear and compelling sense of the Saviour's grace and power, in whom our refuge lies.

Luther used to say, in his vigorous manner, If you must sin, sin with all your might. Surely the maxim is better turned the other way: If you follow Christ at all, do it with your whole heart. Determine that in this highest sphere you will be thorough, and so concentrate all the forces of your being on the chief

end of life as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Think what He can make of life, if you but trust Him fully, and it will help you to say, as well as keep you sincere in saying, "This one thing I do; I press forward unto the mark".

X

THE BODY A TEMPLE

Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?—1 Corinthians vi. 19.

HUMAN nature has a deep-rooted tendency, as history shows by multiplied examples, to speak and act as if the body counted for nothing in religion. So in different ages men have come forward declaring—what not a few of their hearers were quite ready to believe—that between spirit and matter there yawns a gulf so wide that nothing which the body either does or endures can have any real effect on the conscience or heart. Of course not infrequently their aim in thus splitting life into two separate compartments, each hermetically sealed against the other, was to leave the field clear for the license of ignoble passion. The wish, in other words, has been father to the thought. Men felt more free to go wrong, they found it easier to give the rein to sensual appetite, once they had shut their eyes and swallowed this utterly false theory that the body can be used in any way you choose without injuring or staining the soul.

Now common-sense, the instinctive voice of nature,

is enough to disprove this. We have only to think quietly for a moment to see that such an argument is not only baseless but vile, and that no amount of reasoning can make it either true or respectable. The influence of matter upon spirit, of things upon the soul within, is the most familiar fact in life. Take, for example, the influence of music. Music is a thing so invisible, so fine and rare, that it hardly seems fair to call it material; and yet in origin it is material. But think nevertheless how manifold are the feelings it evokes, whether it be the swell of organ in cathedral aisle or the sobbing lament of the pipes in Highland glen. No sorrow is too deep, no joy too rapturous, no action too intense, no mood too subtle to come within its scope; it excites all and it expresses all. Here at least is one point where matter and its motions, in their play across the senses, have the profoundest influence upon the mind. Or take, as another example, the effect of nature upon the imagination. Take a sunset, which science will tell you, and tell you truly, is no more in outward reality than a series of vibrations in the ether; and yet think with what a wondrous voice it speaks. "As men watch the appearance of the sunset," says a recent writer, "thoughts and feelings arise in their hearts that move their being in unnumbered ways. Youth is fired with high ideals; age consoled with peaceful hopes; saints as they pray see

heaven opened; sinners feel conscience deeply stirred. Mourners are comforted; weary ones rested; artists inspired; lovers united; worldlings purified and softened as they gaze. In a short half-hour all is over; the mechanical process has come to an end; the gold has melted into grey. But countless souls, meanwhile, have been soothed, and solaced, and uplifted by that evening benediction from the far-off sky; and the course of human life to-day is modified and moulded by the setting of yesterday's sun."

Now if matter outside of us can exert so wonderful a power on the mind, it needs no reasoning to prove that the same holds good, in a still higher degree, of the matter composing our own bodies. For here the connection is infinitely closer. So intimate is the bond between soul and body that it has naturally come to be employed as the very type of immediate union or alliance; and the poet has illustrated that, in a well-known line, when he writes that God is very near to us: "Closer is He than breathing, nearer than hands or feet". Indeed every day we see new instances in which, owing to this indissociable connection, the soul has written its own character on the body. We are usually right in judging a man by his facial expression. His nature peeps out in the glance of his eye, the touch of his hand, the tone and inflection of his voice, his unstudied and unconscious gestures and attitudes, even the peculiarities of

his gait. It is not quite an accident that we read, of John the Baptist, that "he looked upon Jesus *as He walked*, and said, Behold the Lamb of God". Even in such minor details the soul moulds the body. In the same way, since the bond is a mutual one, the body helps to make the soul. What a man does with his hands and brain and nervous system is going all the time to shape his character. As St. Paul puts it, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the deeds done *in his body*"; for the body is the soul's partner always, sharer in its sin and sharer in its triumph. If, then, our bodies are as real a part of our complete personality as our minds, no man who cares for truth, or who reverences the will of God, will dare to speak as though what happens to them, or the uses to which they may be put, were ultimately of no account.

So let us ask, this evening, how as Christian people we ought to look upon our bodies, and what new light is shed upon their part in life through the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ.

First, note *the dignity of the body*. The text informs us what the apostle believed about that. He has no hesitation in saying that these bodies of ours are temples of the Holy Ghost, or, as he puts it a verse or two before, "members of Christ". Think what that metaphor of the temple meant. There had been a temple in Israel before, all compact

of ivory and gold and marble; and not many years were to pass, from the date of this letter, till its hour struck and it passed away. But, ere it fell, its place had been taken by the redeemed personalities in which Christ was dwelling. So St. Paul's argument is very simple—only this: God inhabits us; we inhabit our bodies; therefore our bodies are God's temple. Though he had laboured the point for page on page, he could have added nothing to the solemn emphasis of that one word—the body a Divine temple.

Now that is a truth which even professing Christians do not always grasp at once. The title-deeds of an estate may be in our hands long before we enter on possession, and the place we give this principle in our minds is an illustration of that. Of course in some ways our slowness to grasp it is intelligible enough. Our bodies never cease to be imperfect. Saving faith makes no alteration on them, at least directly. If a man is blind or lame or diseased when he turns to God in Christ, conversion will not cure his weakness or provide new sense-organs. Indeed there are frailties and treacheries of the body, if I may call them so, which beset us to the very end; and these Christ noted sympathetically when He found the disciples, who should have watched, sleeping for sorrow, and said: "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak". Then besides that, there is the fact staring

us in the face that the body is a perpetual avenue of temptation. Sometimes the cravings of the flesh come to be terribly wolfish in their eagerness. When the broken will is swept away like a chip of timber tossed down the rapids, the gains of a year's self-control may be lost in five minutes. So the body keeps us in touch with all the sensuous allurements of the world. One comes to think of it as a store-house of explosives, which may go off any moment if a lighted match be dropped.

Now all this appears to go dead against what I have called the dignity of the body; and to dwell merely on this aspect would soon take the heart out of the bravest. The cure for melancholy, however, here as elsewhere, is to recollect that the dismal part of the truth is only one part, and not the most important. We have to look at, not merely that side of the wave that is all dark and purple with shadow, but the one that gleams in sunlight. And this means, for our present subject, that from the highest point of view every instinct, every appetite of the body is right and good in its own place, and that this is proved by the experience of Jesus Christ our Lord. His life shows the body in a new light, does it not? Think how Christ's body helped His ministry to the heavy-laden and sinful. How else could He have brought God's love into actual touch with their wants than through the medium of His body, His healing touch,

His tears of sympathy, His words and looks and movements? Aye, and beyond and above all that, it was through His mortal frame that Jesus Christ was capable of enduring all the depth of anguish a Saviour had to suffer, and, as St. Peter says, bore our sins in His own body on the tree. Thus, in the personal experience of One who was bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, we perceive once for all what the body may be, as the pure and obedient servant of the spirit.

So let us lay the truth to heart, that Christ has redeemed both parts of our nature, and that His will for us covers both the material and the spiritual. The body has its own share in the great salvation. Certain ancient philosophers and some Christian thinkers who ought to have known better have tended to despise the body; they have heaped abuse upon it, as the jail and prison of the soul; but the one fact of Christ's coming in the flesh has swept away all such shame and contempt and poured honour upon every member. Wherever His Gospel has penetrated, it has taught men a sweet and beautiful reverence even for the bodies of the dead. The nobility and sanctity of the human organism have been revealed in Jesus.

Moreover, if the body is redeemed, it is no longer our own, and has to be cared for as particularly as honesty bids us care for some one else's property.

The guarding of health is a part of religion. To neglect or squander our bodily powers is to steal what belongs to God. As Charles Kingsley said once, and no man had a better right to speak: "There has always seemed to me something impious in the neglect of personal health. . . . I could not do half the good I do do, if it were not for the strength and activity some consider coarse and degrading."

Note, secondly, *the gravity of bodily sin.* Strictly speaking, this is the connexion in which the text occurs. St. Paul is warning the Corinthians against the foul practices which made their city a by-word, and tainted every breath they drew. On that subject he does not argue. He simply bids them consider that their bodies are God's temples.

Some sins, as we know, have little connection with the body; they run their course within the mind. Of this class, malice, envy, irreverence are examples. But other sins are done against the body, directly hostile to its wholesome existence, and suicidal by their very nature. St. Paul has a short way with such transgressions. Our body a temple? well, a temple is where God dwells, and God can only dwell in a holy place. Therefore, every sin that leaves the body defiled or impaired is a desecration of the shrine. Sensuality is sacrilege. Amongst Jews and pagans the sanctity of temples was protected at the risk of life, jealous guardianship being lavished nowhere so

eagerly as where the Deity had taken up His abode, and on the man who dared to violate its sacredness there fell vengeance swift and terrible. Our zeal is not to be behind theirs, surely. If you and I, friends, have believed in Jesus Christ, then the Spirit of God is living in us now, and an obligation is laid on us to keep His dwelling-place unsullied.

So far as one can judge, some Christian people are able to sin in the body with a light heart. They will speak of serious lapses from self-control as pardonable trifles. There are districts of our country where intoxication is reckoned quite compatible with genuine or even eminent piety, and still more serious sin is glozed over with fair words. Then besides that, apart from these graver matters, are there not people who ignore the fact that religion has a real bearing even on such things as eating and drinking? May not unworthy indulgence in that direction coarsen the soul? How many an hour of irritability, of bad temper, of peevish murmuring and rebellion, of angry railing at men or even bitter thoughts of God is due simply to our being somewhat too heavy with meat and drink! If men can eat and drink to the glory of God,—and St. Paul says they can—they certainly may so eat and drink as to dishonour Him. It is a miserable fate to become far-off descendants of Esau, who sold his birth-right for a mess of pottage.

Where, then, lies the gravity and guilt of sins like

gluttony, intemperance, or lust in any form? In this, for one thing, that *they give the body the upper hand.* The only right and safe thing is that the body shall always serve. Any attempt to reverse the Divine law of our nature, that that part of us which is akin to God must rule, means a loss of true manhood and inevitable suffering. Forget this, and the appetite which was but a means in the Divine plan comes to be an end in itself. "Hold off from sensuality," Cicero writes, "for if you once give yourself to it, you will not be able to think of anything else." The body ceases to be the soul's instrument or servant, and becomes its dungeon, then its tomb; so that the drunkard reeling down the street is, in too many cases, a man whose body has already become the grave of a lost spirit. The power of God in the Christian gospel can work miracles, no doubt; but they are miracles just because they are so uncommon; and not seldom, in the presence of such pitiful sensual ruin, one's heart is chilled by the fear that men may even while they live be sunk in death as truly as if they were already under the sod, and the grass waving above their head. Be not deceived; God is not mocked; whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.

Then again, bodily sin is so heinous because it defiles what Christ has redeemed. The reason why Christ's atoning passion was endured, and followed

by triumphant resurrection, lay in God's great purpose that our human nature, in both its parts, should be cleansed and restored in beauty and purity. For this He bore the shame, the grief, the scourging, the spitting, the awful desolation of the last hour. The aim and issue of it all was that we should become a habitation of God through the Spirit. Gross sin in the body thwarts and defeats that purpose. Therefore it is to be feared and avoided by men and women who have a stake in the Divine redemption, and know that God has called them unto holiness.

So, with the gravity of such transgression in view, let us refuse to allow conscience to fall silent on this question. Let us realise that to sin against the body which Christ has redeemed, and in which He dwells by His Spirit, is to say, as plainly as deeds can say it, that we should care little though that redemption had never been accomplished, or though we ourselves had obtained no part in it. That is something woefully out of place in a Christian life. And pardon for it can only be found, though, thank God, it *can* be found, in a sincere repentance which loathes and forsakes the old transgression in the power of a higher impulse.

Lastly, note *the prospects of the body*. What is supremely important here also is to fix in our minds that truth, to which I have referred more than once already, that the body has its own real share in the

hopes and promises that cluster round the name of Jesus. The heathen said—our modern heathen say still—the body will perish like the animals; what matters it how we treat it? let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die. Nay, replies Christian faith, there is a second and nobler chapter in the story even of this frail tenement we here inhabit, which sheds back its light upon the chapter we are living in now. God, who raised up Jesus, shall in due time also quicken your mortal bodies.

How that is to come about nobody can explain; I do not suppose even St. Paul knew, or he would have told us. Anyhow, there is no need to put our faith at the mercy of dubious theories, such as have often circulated, as to ways in which the actual material particles composing the bodies we now have will be sifted out, and put together, at the resurrection. All that Scripture suggests, where it does come upon that subject, is that the relation of the present to the future body is like the relation of seed sown to springing grain; and that, clearly, is a relation, not of identity, but of causation and continuity. There is likeness, but far more also there is difference. A Christian lady, who has suffered much, wrote to me the other day: "I don't want this body over again; it has cost me too much pain". I think we may trust our Lord to provide something better for us than what we now have. If it were not so, He would have told

us. There will be likeness, so far as that is needed to maintain a living oneness with the old experience of earth; but much more, there will be newness and difference, for the former things have passed away.

So then, brethren, reverence is owed by us to the body, in its own real measure; for it also has the dignity and glory of sharing, after a fashion we can more or less understand, in the blessings Christ has gained; it too catches some gleams of the spreading light flung by God's great redemption. It has to be consciously laid, no less than heart and soul, upon the Divine altar, and consecrated to Him we love. "I beseech you, present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God." All its infirmities, its treacheries, its limitations, are some day to give place and pass away. So let us seize afresh that great word of faith, which so often we have heard at the graveside, soothing hearts of pain, "Christ shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory". There speaks the voice of apostolic trust and hope; and our own poet's words only proclaim the same secret and repeat the same prophecy:—

> It is an old belief
> That on some solemn shore,
> Beyond the sphere of grief,
> Dear friends will meet once more.

Beyond the sphere of time,
And sin, and fate's control,
Serene in changeless prime,
Of body and of soul.
That creed I fain would keep,
That hope I'll not forgo;
Eternal be the sleep,
Unless to waken so.

XI

LIFE HID WITH CHRIST

(Before Communion)

Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.—Colossians iii. 3.

Words like these, it is obvious, are not addressed indiscriminately to the world at large. They describe a class of people, and demand an audience, which, if fit, is also few. Not that the text is in any sense obscure, although it belongs to an age far from our own. Not that it raises needless barriers. Only, it takes for granted that we have undergone a great peculiar experience, which has brought us into a new world. In short, as very few sayings even in the New Testament do, it touches the centre and focus of personal Christianity. It tells the open secret of discipleship.

The calmness with which St. Paul utters this great principle is astonishing. One feels it to be a conspicuous mark of its higher origin in the Bible that it speaks of stupendous themes with such quiet power, with the composure of eternal things. Men get hold of a great idea, or an idea they suppose great, and

then they fret and fume over the discovery with a dust and excited commotion that half conceal the new find. But few things are more impressive than the tranquil strength of the apostles. The message they told was not their message. The gospel was no windfall of their own. Accordingly they felt no need loudly to claim a place for it, as though jealous that the voice of Judæa should be submerged amid the innumerable voices of the world. God's truth, they knew, if only it were declared with plain sincerity, would perform without fail its own specific work, and bear authentic witness to its own origin. It is with the same restrained power that the apostle now writes: "Your life is hid with Christ in God". He is so sure, that argument or appeal there is none. The believer's hidden life is something so real, so basal, that proof can be dispensed with. Like the joy of sunlight, or the fresh beauty of a summer hillside, it is not an inference from anything; it is the first presupposition and beginning of all else. It is the primal fact on which we take our stand, with a confidence that may falter but does not slacken, and from which we look out across life's varied story, and up to the heaven that is coming.

The fact that St. Paul should have felt justified in writing thus to inhabitants of Colosse is a remarkable evidence of the power of Christianity to touch hearts and change lives. Colosse, although no worse than

the average contemporary city, can scarcely have been much better; and a few years before, it is tolerably certain, the notion of sending a communication of this kind to people of the place would have been a melancholy sarcasm. But all that had been changed. There were men and women in its streets and lanes now who had believed in Jesus Christ, and who possessed the peace and joy of reconciliation. Risen with Christ, they had the very springs of their being hid with Him in God. Once there had been no depths in their life; all had been shallow, specious, external, busy with affairs that mattered little, crowded with trifles, pathetically wasted in worthless ambition and fleeting pleasure. Then God called them, as He calls us, into a new domain, and their whole experience was re-created. In the barren wastes fountains of water were springing up; in wide ranges of unprofitable folly mines had been discovered that would yield the gold and gems of faith and hope and love. Once they were content with a poor, starveling, fortuitous morality; always untrustworthy, always unequal to a new or sudden strain; whereas now their stores of power and gladness in service were held high above the reach of sorrow and temptation, because treasured and guarded well by Christ in the unseen.

Three aspects of truth are here, I think, which may help us as we approach the Table of Christ.

First, note *the old life left behind.* "Ye are dead," St. Paul writes, or even, as in stricter accuracy we may render, "ye died". He is indicating a definite occasion in the past. Sometimes the passage of a soul into God's kingdom is a very sudden thing. It may even be as the flight of a bird for swiftness. We lie down one night our old selves, and ere we sleep again the revolution has occurred. In this text, however, suddenness of that kind is not necessarily implied. Men may die swiftly, or they may die slowly; it matters nothing, once they have wakened on the immortal side of death. At the equator no visible line is stretched round the world for all to see; nevertheless, the line is actually crossed; at some definite point the ship leaves one hemisphere and enters on the other. Just so, when God's eye reads our past, many circumstances may take on a bold prominence and fixity of outline that were concealed, or only half displayed, to our feebler gaze. Where we saw nothing but an unbroken, imperceptible advance, He, it is possible, may discern a cleavage, sharp as though effected by a scimitar-stroke, between the old existence and the new. And the fittest metaphor to illustrate the transition that St. Paul can think of, is that passage from one world to another which we call *death*.

You mark the idea that is working in his mind. Union to Jesus Christ produces a moral and spiritual

transmutation in men analogous to death and resurrection. Death is for the soul no cessation of existence, but rather a transition into a new environment, like buds rising above the sod in spring. In like manner by regeneration the soul is not robbed of its identity, but attachment to Christ elevates it into a new region. He died *for* sin, to break its power, to undo the ruin, to rectify the wrong; we, through Him, die *to* sin, in sympathy with His righteousness, aided by His influence, impelled and compelled by His great love. Not that we become sinless. We are the victims of no such hallucination. But, whatever sin remains, the glad and honest certainty is now open to us that our steadfast desire and habitual choice are now identified radically with the will of Christ. He has made us new creatures, in whom sin's tyranny is broken; He has given us a new self, the only self worth having or worth keeping. And formidable as are still the world, the flesh and the devil, now we know that there is a Brother beside us in the conflict, and a victorious unseen Presence near us that will be ours for ever and ever. Thus through Him lives that were hopeless can become blessed, the barren can become fruitful and the weakest more than conqueror. The old life dies when faith is born.

Brethren, surely it is a great thing to have this settled once for all. The old life, like the trees the backwoodsmen cannot wait to cut down, is *ringed;*

and, as when that strip of bark is cut out, its withering is only a question of time. Or, to change the figure, the channels in which its streams once flowed may now and then seem to run as copiously as ever; but gradually the parent spring is failing, and one day it will cease, never to fill again. You who have the new heart, but are sorely plagued by the old—remember this. Do not complain that the struggle is unavailing. Do not even grow impatient with yourselves; for not to have surrendered is itself a victory. And besides that, the battle is not to be unending. Your day of triumph, final and complete, is marked for you in God's plan, and draws nearer every hour. Some day, at the last, as surely as you once crossed the line that severs sin from Christ, and chose your side with Him for ever, some day even you will overcome, and upon your head will be set the crown of perfect righteousness.

Note, secondly, *the hidden life now possessed.* "Your life is hid with Christ." In other words, there is something about each genuine believer, however simple, which will more than tax the keenest intelligence to explain. Christian character is not to be accounted for by mere surface phenomena. To unveil the secret, you must go down into the buried regions beneath ordinary thoughts and avocations, down into the unseen depths of personality. As you cross a highland moor you may come upon a curious

bright streak of green, winding in and out among the heather, its pure and shining verdure clearly marked against the dull brown of its immediate surroundings. What is it, and how came it there? Whence rises the sap to feed this soft elastic ribband of turf? There is a tiny stream below, a runnel of sweet water flowing down there out of sight, only hinting its presence by the green beauty above. So the springs of Christian life are hid, hid with Christ in God.

They are hid, for one thing, from the unsympathising world; but of this I will not say much. Always to the outsider there must appear something inscrutable and mysterious in those who live by faith in the Son of God. He may merely wonder at the mystery, or he may dumbly resent it; but he is always conscious of its presence. Thus it is that, often, when he enquires how personal religion is to be accounted for, with a surprising superficiality he accepts any explanation but the right one. Self-interest, fear, tradition, sheer unrelieved delusion; these are among the theories by which it has been sought to render the prevalence of faith intelligible; and by explaining it, to rob it of substantial power. That has always been the world's way. Even of the Master they whispered, "He is beside Himself"; and of the disciples, with new Pentecostal fire leaping in their veins, it was felt enough to say, "These men are full of new

wine". All that a believer may plead of light given in darkness, and comfort in affliction, and chastisement amid sin, and succour that dispels the lowering cloud of temptation, is listened to as "a tale of little meaning, tho' the words be strong". The Christian secret is a secret from the world.

But we may go further; the text has a still profounder meaning. For it means, or at least it implies —does it not?—that a believer's deepest life is in some sense hidden from himself. Is it not so at the origin and birthday of personal religion? The wind blows where it lists; "thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth"—*thou* canst not tell, no, not though it were in thy heart that it is blowing. Regeneration makes a man God's in a more radical fashion than he may ever dream. To-day men of science, obviously, are moving about among forces whose nature they but half realise, and which only now and then flash an isolated token of their character into the world of knowledge; and the same thing, in its measure, holds true of the inmost experience of the Christian. The flowers that spring from fellowship with God, and the fruit of it, are his delight; but the roots go away down invisibly. He knows that grace unspeakable is offered freshly to him every hour, and that he is bidden respond to it with trust and longing; but now the two meet and mingle in his soul—the Divine

grace and the human trust—he cannot tell. He finds that communion with God sets his heart perfectly at rest, and that this strange inward power is never so effectual as in the midst of trial; but the rationale of it is all beyond him. He can feel the power of Christ resting upon him, turning his very weakness into strength; but the methods and processes by which such things happen surpass his full comprehension, as truly as does the mysterious relation of soul and body. His life is *hid* with Christ; hid, in a real measure, even from himself.

What is all this except to affirm that the fountains of our highest life, in virtue of which we endure, are in Christ's keeping, not our own? He guards for us the springs of faith and love. Out of the reservoir, not here but yonder, in which our supplies are massed and stored, enough is bestowed for each day's need. We do not depend as Christians on what, with careful painstaking toil, we ourselves can scrape together; our sufficiency is of God. All that Christ has, He has for those who trust Him; and His sorrow—if perchance He sorrows still—is that they draw upon Him so meagrely, with the perpetual misgiving that they are asking too much. Strange instances of delusion are on record where men who had a fortune in the hands of their banker believed they were paupers, and could scarcely be persuaded to draw a cheque for the most elementary necessities; and occasionally one is

reminded of them by believers' neglect, and all but denial, of their unexhausted treasures in Jesus Christ. So do not judge your Redeemer's generous love by what you have as yet received. Remember how much more He willed to do for you, had you only suffered it; you have not been straitened in Him, but in yourselves. The explanation of past failure or inward poverty is, always, not that Christ is less rich than we had supposed, but that our heart has been narrow and unwilling.

The Christian, accordingly, being thus in immediate communication with Christ's boundless life, is a man with incalculable reserves at his disposal, whose existence is wealthier by far than appears. Often the secret of a picture's charm lies in its suggestion of a wide-spreading illimitable background, in which the observer's eye and fancy lose themselves half-unconsciously; and the same kind of impression clings about every human character that is possessed by, and rooted in, the felt love of God. The best part is never told. Most is left to the onlooker's imagination. And how often, forgetting this, society has taken a Christian man at an utterly false value! It gathered round him, with menaces or allurements or prophecies of ruin, expecting his fall as a thing of course; yet within that humble soul were hidden springs of unconquerable power and fearless resistance undreamt-of by his assailants, and the attack

dropped from him harmlessly as the summer tide from the crag. His life was hid with Christ in God. Like his Master, he was sustained in unseen ways. He had access, as we all have access, to a love so deep, so broad, so high that it passeth knowledge. And the task of a disciple is so to walk that men will say: "There must be springs in such a life; that steady sustained peace and gladness could not flourish without roots somewhere." And thus the new life that came from Christ must be so used, with His aid, as to point men back to Him again.

Then besides that, life's resources, being hid thus in Christ, are protected against trouble and dispeace. Here, of course, we must distinguish carefully between what are only superficial incidents, and that which is passing in the depths. At first sight the experience of a Christian man impresses a bystander as pretty much the same with that of any one else. He is not spared the common vicissitudes of existence. Like his neighbours, he enters the harsh turmoil of business, with its cares and disappointing reverses. He too must often sow for a harvest that never comes. And there is all the pain of wearing suspense, and perplexity of conscience, and fears for those he loves; no exemption is allowed him, and he claims none. All this and more is true; it is the common lot of man. Nevertheless, this accumulated list of ills, though multiplied and intensified, need not touch the inmost

life seated in the depths of the heart. The storm may rage upon the coast, yet not a breath of its fury reach the sequestered valley that nestles in the bosom of the hills. The ocean's surface may heave with racing billows, while yet the untroubled deeps are still. And in the same way, amid his occupations and even his sore distresses, the believer may have a mind at perfect peace; for his life, the true life, the life that really makes the man, is hid with Christ in God. And this is your priceless, unceasing privilege, dear friends, that when you will you can retreat into that calm haven, and bid defiance to the tempest. Wherever you may be, the desire and aspiration of a moment will bring you to the holy place of prayerful meditation where God is, and before that quiet shrine you will find your true self, calm and safe with Him.

So note, lastly, *the life yet to be revealed.* In the New Testament men's eyes and thoughts are ever bent forward, as they wait for the voice and footfall of a returning Lord, when that which is hid now will be so no longer. It *is* hidden now, just because we are here and Christ is yonder. But like the bud sleeping within its swelling sheath, the Christian's present lot is big with promise. One day the secret will be out. "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory."

Take an instance. Take a countryman of our own, at work in India. Civil servant, perhaps, or soldier,

missionary, merchant—he labours on with hand and brain, doing his appointed work bravely. But his home is in Scotland. Those he loves best in all the world are there, and where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also; and though he would scorn to neglect duty, yet his truest life centres not in the daily routine of his station, but in that home far away. And often, how often! as he rides from post to post, or rests in evening coolness, his thoughts go a-wandering over the sea to some cottage on the hill-side where his children are, and he hears their shouts amid the heather and bracken, or sees the mother bend over them as they sleep. It is an inner life, a secret hoard of thought and feeling, unsuspected by those nearest him, from which nevertheless his noblest inspiration and courage rise. So he labours on, knowing that on some approaching day foreign service will be over, and his face will be set homeward; and then, what used to be no more than the private luxury of quiet fancy will be the open and perpetual interest of each successive day and hour.

Is there one of us who does not feel that this thing is a parable? We give thanks to God for all the punctual strength and comfort that descend to us now; we bless the hand that strews them on our way; we seek to employ them in His great service. But all the while the thought is uppermost that something better, *far* better, is yet to be revealed. I say not we

ought to long for death; that may be sentiment only, not religion; for with the time or mode of death appointed us we are unconcerned, resigning it gladly to the secret love of God. Yet more and more, if we are Christians at all, we are growing always surer that God has kept the best to the last. Here we draw from the stream, but one day we shall stand beside the fountain-head. We shall leave the foreign land, and travel "to God, who is our home".

So, friends, our life is hid now, because Christ also is hid, not in darkness unsearchable, but in the light undimmed and excelling where God dwells. It is better that it should be so. It is better that stores and treasures should be outside ourselves. And every fresh gift of Christ, each new privilege, each kind token and remembrance of His love, as in the Table He has spread now, only bids us think how much He still keeps in reserve, awaiting the disclosure of the great day. How rich and deep must be Love's fountain, if from it flows this brimming river, so full of water, making glad the city of God!

XII

SWORD AND TROWEL

Every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.—Neh. iv. 17.

Among the graphic scenes of this book none reads better, or counts for more in imagination, than the present sketch relating how they built the city walls. And in great part the interest revolves round Nehemiah himself. A singularly attractive figure, he stands out like a giant among children; and evidently it is to his tireless faith and perseverance, in the main, that we must ascribe success which crowned work of enormous difficulty. He had been royal cup-bearer, then pro-consul, then architect; and now we find him playing the part of general—a general, too, whose presence was worth more to his men than a whole brigade. History contains no finer instance of the effect of one man's courage. Men scarcely suspect how much a brave stand, or the speaking of brave words, may do to reanimate trembling hearts beside them. Never forget that there are others ready to take their cue from us;

possible deserters watching our attitude ere they choose their side. One step backward on our part may send them flying. When perils loom dark, and men's hearts are failing them for fear, let us think upon this, and stand true for God and the right.

Precisely at this moment the crucial question was whether the Samaritans were to succeed in their new effort, the last in a long series, to prevent the rise of a fortified city. Tribes whose work of outrage and plunder had been checked hastily formed a coalition against the Jews, with Sanballat and Tobiah at its head. Evil men are quick to see that they must act together, a secret that believers, perhaps, might be quicker to learn from them. Then, besides this bitter opposition, there was a weariness beginning to creep over the toilers, intensified no doubt by the dismal prophecies of ruin poured upon them, like a douche of cold water, by friends in adjacent villages. In short, a powerful hand was needed on the helm to steer the good ship through the channel; one swerve to right or left, and she would be on the reefs. So the hour waited for the man, and in Nehemiah God's mercy gave the man for the hour.

He made such preparations to receive the enemy that they judged it best to pause. And our text shows these preparations in the making. Since the plan must be of such a kind that it could be maintained night and day for months, he gave a military char-

acter to the entire operation. To guard against either surprise or panic, his bodyguard was divided into two companies, one standing under arms, the other labouring as a fatigue party at the slowly rising walls. Even the builders kept their weapons ready. And each man knew that the great leader's eye was on him, and served the better for it.

So there was work, and vigilance, and armed readiness; and over and above all that, as Nehemiah's sturdy piety made certain, there was also prayer. These things go well together. "We made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night". Some people exhibit an unhappy talent for pitting one element in the Christian life against another. In their conception of the function of prayer it becomes, not the soul of work, but its substitute. That is just pious indolence; a not particularly subtle form of selfishness with no right to any of the promises. When God bids us stand still, and bares His right arm for action, it is after everything has been done that human minds can devise or human muscles execute. Others, again, so watch and labour as to forget dependence upon the Father. They look down at their hindrances, or round about at their foes, and but seldom up to their Saviour. So life becomes care-worn, dejected, nervous; all because the peace and tranquillity of prayer has gone out of it. The calm strength that dwells

in the devout heart has been lost, and until it is recovered nothing prospers. And only by degrees do we learn the truth that the eagerness of human effort and the sense of divine inflowing power are not two aspects of the Christian experience in the sense of being separable from one another, but they are two in the sense of being the outside and the inside of the same fabric. The one is body craving a vital spirit; the other is spirit that apart from body achieves nothing.

What, then, does this scene on the old walls of Jerusalem, with its builders who at the same time were light-armed infantry—what does it teach us? First, I think, it is *a representation of the true life, as a building and a fight.* Now this immediately recalls two sister parables once placed side by side in the Gospels: the parable of the man who built the tower and could not finish it, and the parable of the king with ten thousand men who has to meet the invading host of twice as many. Christ employed these figures to illustrate the serious nature of discipleship, and when we take them as one whole they give the same general impression as this Old Testament story. The life that blesses the world, and will bear being looked back upon, whatever else it is, is a building and a fight.

What am I building? it may be said. You are building human character, the house you are to live

in always. Among the lessons which modern science has engraved on the imagination none is more solemn, none is more inspiring than this, that whatever is came out of that which has been. Take that law, or guiding principle, and apply it to the inner life of men and women, and it declares that in your character and mine nothing exists by chance, but everything is there because it was put there. Each stone in the pile has been raised and set in its place by our hands. We have built the house we are now living in, and we are at work on the house that is to shelter us hereafter. I need not dwell on the particulars of this building, or run into details of the way in which it is carried out. But this is worth remark, that while at other constructions we labour only as and when we choose, this we are engaged in perpetually,—morning, noon and evening; in session and on holiday; when we think about it and when we never give it a thought. In that sense, of continued and never-interrupted progress, the thing builds itself. Like the throbbing of the heart all unawares, so our hands, even when we know it least, are labouring ceaselessly at the walls of the house of life.

That is a commonplace thought enough, even if no one observing the bulk of men would credit them with believing it; but if it is not only commonplace, but true, one or two inferences follow. One is that we ought to secure that what we are making *is* a

building, and not a ruin. Now and then in the outskirts of a city one passes an open piece of ground with a few cart-loads of stones flung down anyhow; and it is in this condition that too many lives stay to the end—collected materials for a noble character, you may call them, never fitted or framed together, and finally left in the same rudimentary state as at first. Memories of home are there, and friends, and Christian knowledge, and all other things that might go to the making of a man after God's own heart; but yet, for lack of decision to rise and in God's name *build*, not one stone is laid upon another. And then, in other cases, as we know, the work is done, but done so carelessly and crookedly, and with such fatal unseen flaws in the foundation, that one day, unsuspected by the man's friends, or even by the man himself, there comes a trembling and a gaping in the walls, and the house that seemed built to last goes down in dust and shame. Friends, you are staking all upon the soundness of the edifice, and you have no more than one chance; therefore let both materials and workmanship be as good as you can furnish. Get down to the real foundation and pierce, as lighthouse engineers do, into the living rock. When they build a mansion in Rome or Jerusalem to-day, they have to dig, often, through scores of feet of rubbish, the *débris* of old empires, ere they find what will bear the superincumbent weight; and just so, if we are

dead in earnest, and resolved that for us life shall rise firmly based on truth, as truth is in Jesus, then moral and spiritual excavation of a far-reaching kind may have to be the first stage of the business. If the deepest things in you have not gone down, and clasped themselves, like strong roots, around the great attributes and promises of God, so that He has become your eternal portion, some day you will see the top-stone swaying to its fall under the stress of wind and flood. In His will is our peace, and beneath the shadow of His wings our refuge.

Then, besides that, the question meets us: *What* is the building we are at work upon? Is it, as one has said, "a shop, a mill, a lecture-hall, a stately pleasure-house, a dram-shop, a temple?" Which? Is it a place where we can get not only work out of our body or our brain, but where our soul can live? Many people so confine their live interest within the bounds of their daily avocations that one trembles to think of what would happen were some unexpected turn of circumstances to take them out of their mill or their counting-house. Their life has been so starved, all but one small corner, that it recalls the well-known epitaph, set on a French tomb-stone, "He was born a man, and he died a grocer". Ah brethren! the walls rising under the hand of these brave Jews were not merely designed for their own safety; their nobler aim was to enclose, and be consecrated by, the

Temple of the Holy One of Israel. Night and day they toiled at the battlements, putting tears and blood into the long task; but at the heart of all stood the sanctuary, more dear and more enduring still. So let us see to it that whatever we may build has a place for God at its centre, and that that place is filled. Better a life to which the saying of the old monk applied, "I have only one window, but it looks toward heaven," than an existence crowded with secularities, but unlighted and blind on the Godward side. So much, then, for the first of our thoughts.

The second was that the true life is a conflict. Warfare goes along with work, rendering "sword and trowel" the fittest motto for the experience that has been appointed us. Perhaps it is occasionally open to question whether all the actual elements of conflict are really indispensable, and whether now and then we may not manufacture strifes and contentions for ourselves superfluously; but at least it is plain that little of that which is worth having, in character or spiritual attainment, can be had apart from warfare of some kind. Atmospheric resistance plays havoc with a multitude of schemes for rapid locomotion that look wonderfully well on paper; and similarly, when you and I come down from the dreamland of hazy aspiration, with the aim of translating our ideals into conduct, we encounter an amount of friction and opposition that beforehand we should

scarce have credited. It is not merely that outside influences storm in upon us, or that mere resistance to temptation occupies so disappointing a proportion of our time and energies. The worst difficulties lie deeper. There were secret allies of Sanballat in Jerusalem who would have been overjoyed to open the gates to him, and help to massacre the garrison; and just so we harbour our own fiercest foes within, and have our gravest dangers not in front, but in the rear. That is the secret of the conflict that never sleeps. A generation ago it was very common to say of one whose Christian life was beginning that he had "found peace"; but while that phrase has a deep truth of its own, of which I trust we know the meaning, yet it falls short of the complete truth. There is peace, peace profound and abiding, at the centre; but there may be, and in a very real sense there must be, war at the circumference. Even when the capital is held by the true King, tumult and strife murmur on the frontier. I can believe indeed that for a man who, before, had been yielding to self-indulgence unresistingly, going as an ox goeth to the slaughter, the day of conversion and change might be the beginning of a new consciousness of battle, and an undreamt-of life of turmoil, in which he felt as never previously the need of One to teach his hands to war and his fingers to fight. Whether that be our case or not, at least for us all there is conflict enough,

if only it be loyally accepted. If the one hand grasps a tool, the other must hold a weapon. It is the unwarlike life that ends in a heap of ruins.

So take this view of existence, as both a building and a fight, and let us lay it for one moment alongside our own, for comparison and contrast. Have we chosen to build anything; and if we have, is it something for which we can fight with a good conscience and in the name of God? Look at these preconditions of worthy character steadily, and let them tell you the truth about what you have been, and are.

Next, in these verses we find *the methods that ensure success*. How came these men to build and fight on until their great work was done? What enabled them to endure, till Jerusalem was fit to front the world again? The victory was no accident, but the intelligible result of means. So let us go to their school now, and learn their lesson.

For one thing, there is the secret of fellowship. Throughout the long hours these soldier-masons were in living touch with one another. A bugler stood at the general's side, to sound the assembly at the first sign of danger. Thus each belonged to all and all to each.

Now we in Scotland have no need that any man should teach us that religion, if it be worthy of its name, is an individual private thing. History has

burnt that on the nation's soul. But the great truth that religion moves first of all between "God and the soul, the soul and God" is in no way at variance with that other truth, of which Scotsmen think less often, that most of the best helps to a noble life are found in the Christian society. We are not a conglomeration of mutually repellent atoms, with interests diametrically hostile; we are the body of Christ Jesus, and members one of another. As really as the hand can dress the wounded foot, or extract a splinter from the eye, so really can one Christian help his neighbour. An ancient Father, pleading with the Church at Rome to have meetings for prayer, says, "When ye gather together frequently the powers of Satan are cast down, and his mischief cometh to nought"; which is just a homely expression of the principle that the tactics of personal religion fail, and may end in nothing, unless they embrace constant and devout fellowship.

You are planning the man you wish to be; tell me, are there better models to be had than some of the Christian men round about you? And how are you to know them, or the best and highest things in them, if you and they are not continually in touch? Doubtless you may say, I find my pattern in Jesus Christ; and that, of course, is supremely and wholly right, as it is final also. But is there no sense in which it is peculiarly helpful to study what God in

Christ has done for some tempted man like yourself, whose infirmities resemble yours? You are fighting the good fight; a specially hazardous period arrives, a stretch of ground where a slip means death; you will find it better than can be told to cleave closely, just there, to God's people, and draw, in your need, upon the stored wisdom of Christian friendship. There is a magic, an inscrutably gladdening and uplifting power in fellowship with good men; and in the past it has made happy victors of thousands who on the lonely field might have fallen, never to rise.

And then there is the secret, further, of reliance upon God. For human co-operation without faith is poor work; it is too much like pulling on a rope of sand; and failure, when it comes, has calamitous results only the more widely-spread. But to bring God upon the field at once multiplies all resources by an infinite factor defying computation. This is what Nehemiah aimed at. Read his field-orders again: "At the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto me"; and then what follows that? Is it, "Then put your confidence in me," or "We will make them flee before us"? No, but something very different; "Our God shall fight for us". No man ever lived who, if I may employ an anachronism, was more careful to keep his powder dry than Nehemiah; and yet also no man ever lived who saw more clearly the limits of merely human energies, or fell

back more instinctively on the help of his great ally.

Friends, we are constantly being tempted—some of us more fiercely, according to our natural disposition, but all of us are being tempted—to suppose that God is far away, too distant to aid in our little plans, too great to think upon the bitterness of our need. And the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ comes to answer that fear. It tells us, in words Christ sealed with His own blood, that we are not lonely or defenceless, because the name Immanuel is true in all its meaning and all its music—God with us. His presence makes us wise so to build that the house will outlast storms; faith in His love reinforces our spent power, and flings back the battle from the gate, when all seems lost. Life—the old know it, and the young suspect it—life is filled with temptations, sorrows, accusing memories, heaped-up weaknesses, against which we have no hope to stand without that presence and that sympathy; but if, like these believing men, we can say "our God shall fight for us," then we can await the onset with endurance and hearts at peace.

So, brethren, the moral of these things is plain. If you are young, do not plunge into life's conflict alone; do not face life's tasks solitary and unaided. It is a plan which has been tried a thousand times, but never save with failure. Listen rather to Him

who says, "Lo, I am with you always". Take with you the loving power that never tires into both duty and struggle. And if you are older, further on life's road, still cleave to the same plan. Build your stronghold in God's name, and even the shock of death and judgment will not tear its stones asunder. And while the warfare remains, cry to God in the stress of battle, and His help will come at the darkest hour, like sunshine athwart the black thundercloud, and make you mightier than all your foes. "He will send thee help from the sanctuary, and strengthen thee out of Sion."

XIII

GOD'S LOVE FOR JESUS

Therefore doth my Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I might take it again.—St. John x. 17.

THE earlier verses of this chapter treat of a subject —the credentials and life-task of the Good Shepherd —which reaches its natural termination in the sixteenth verse. Thereafter comes, in the next two verses, a kind of note or brief appendix, of an explanatory character. And here we find Christ doing what in this Gospel He does so often—let in a beam of light on the relations that obtained, during His earthly life, between the Son and the Father. It is true that perfect fellowship was such as to remain in great measure, both then and now, an incommunicable secret of Jesus' own heart. In the poorest, meanest life that breathes there rise and move such experiences as no human words can ever recapture or describe. "They pass where words are not." And more than all, in the case of Jesus, there were deep, untold intimacies of communion between the Heart above and the heart below which broke from language and escaped, too full for sound.

At the same time, some few indications are given. Suggestions lie scattered up and down the Gospels which only need patient study to yield us real, if partial, insight. We know enough to feel the glory of the theme; and only enough to make us long to know more. This text contributes its own ray of light. It speaks to us, from Christ's own lips, of the feeling of the Father for the Son, and the reasons that gave it power. That is not far away from common life, as may be supposed, but something which touches us all very nearly.

"The Father loveth Me," Jesus says. Why? "Because I lay down My life." So note, first, that *in His dying Jesus Christ is free.*

That is the thought filling His whole mind just now. He asserts it clearly enough, although without dwelling on it, in this verse; He returns to and amplifies it in the next. When His hour came, the hour of lonely pain and sorrow, He met its coming willingly. The flock was in danger; for its deliverance the Good Shepherd had appeared; so, duly, the ransom-life was paid. It was His own act and deed. It was the fruit of personal choice. When it was open to Him to choose otherwise, He chose thus, going to Calvary in sacrifice that kept back nothing.

Why does Jesus speak so pointedly of this? Why does He come back to it again and yet again? It is because the truth, surely, is one as to which miscon-

ception is very easy. Men have misconceived it in two ways. Either they deny it, or they accept it simply as a thing of course; and which is worse it is difficult to say. To deny it is the equivalent of saying that Christ died because circumstances made Him their plaything, because every way of escape was closed. He was hurried to the Cross against His will, and gave up the ghost a thwarted, broken man. Well, if this is the truth about Jesus Christ, it has some very grave consequences for us. It makes it unmeaning to speak any longer of salvation as ours through what He has done; but, more than that, it implies that if He was only the puppet of blind, merciless fate, how much more are we. If the Leader and Commander Himself was snared and crushed, like a hunted animal, what hope is there for His followers?

Then again, if to reject the voluntary character of Jesus' death is to deny His power, to take that character as merely self-evident is to deny a greater thing still—it is to deny His love. For it is in the *choice* of a redeeming death that the mighty passion of His love is seen. Remember, it was not obvious that He should love us. Nothing in the Christian religion is obvious in that poor sense. If when we stand before the dying Lord at Calvary, our instinct is to say, "Of course!" we betray ourselves as blind and cold as to its central, holiest meaning. Redemption

is not to be lightly assumed, as the blessings of health or commerce or civilisation may be; it is a wondrous miracle, which nothing but Jesus' love and power will make credible. Brethren, if you would keep your sense of that love fresh and keen, recollect how freely He died for you. All our hope is there.

O Saviour, I have nought to plead,
In earth beneath or heaven above,
But just my own exceeding need,
And Thy exceeding love.

And so this feature, the sovereign freedom of it, gives the death of Jesus a place of its own in history. It distinguishes it even from the death of prophets, apostles, reformers, missionaries, and the whole multitude of believers in evil times, who have perished rather than betray their trust. In the figurative language of this chapter, these shepherds lost their lives as they were struggling with the wolf. They did not wish for death, but the call of duty made it a necessity. But Jesus says more than this regarding His own death, says it with deliberation. His experience is different from theirs; He dies, not as being shut up perforce to die, but of set purpose. "No man taketh my life from me; but I lay it down of myself".

Here then, I repeat, we come upon a deep gulf that stretches between Jesus and the holiest and bravest of the saints. It is not a gulf of separation, but it

is a gulf of real distinction. "To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late," the poem sings; but to Jesus Christ death came otherwise than to us. To us it is something in which we are passive; something in which we acquiesce, and to which we yield. We meet it resignedly, willingly, perhaps even joyfully, yet it is never anything else than an experience in which we are seized by a stronger hand and our life taken from us. But the life of Jesus Christ was not taken from Him. It was in His option to lay it down or to keep it. Here as elsewhere, here supremely, He was not victim, He was victor over circumstance. And when at last He bowed His head, it was not because the foe was too strong, but because such was the Father's will, and the Father's will was His.

And yet you and I know that in this world nothing happens without a reason. What, then, was the reason operating here, if not that physical compulsion which is at work elsewhere? Why, as to that, the best explanation of the whole matter, I believe, is the simplest and the oldest, that Jesus died from the mighty and constraining impulse of redeeming love. He died because He chose, and He chose because the souls of men were dear to Him. You may ask difficult questions about that wondrous love. You may ask why He loved us; a very natural inquiry when you consider all that sin has made of us. You may

ask whether surely He might not somewhere have discovered, or created, beings more worthy to be loved. But still, behind and beyond these questions —all so unavoidable, all so unanswerable—you find the vast fact, in which we rejoice and on which we build—the fact which, if taken as a key, opens shut doors of pardon, life, joy, peace; the fact that each trusting soul can whisper to itself: "He loved me, and gave Himself for me". That explains everything; that inspires everything, and gives it its everlasting appeal for sinful men. We are redeemed, forgiven, healed, because Christ Jesus loved us freely.

Note, secondly, *how Jesus clung to God's love in the darkness.* His calm assured sense of the Father's love, one feels, is almost startling; outward appearances were so utterly against it. The shame and suffering yet to come, the agony and death, the dim foreboding of desolation which was crueller torment than them all—this was in Christ's mind as He spoke, and He shrank from it. No doubt moments came when He all but longed for the Cross to arrive more quickly, and a triumphant vision of its completed harvest gladdened Him; but alongside of that went a shrinking and a haunting fear. "Like the pellucid waters of the Rhine and the turbid stream of the Moselle, that flow side by side over a long space, neither of them blending discernibly with the other, so the shrinking and the desire were contempor-

aneous in Christ's mind." Sometimes the pain and reluctance grew nearly unendurable, and then, as in the sweat of blood, soul and body were wrung with anguish. And yet, as here and in other scenes, Jesus was able to look up, out of the very midnight of feeling, and grasp the faithful, unchanging love of God.

Indeed, if we look closer at this text, that is but a feeble way of expressing the truth. It was not merely that the approach of death failed to diminish Jesus' sense that God loved Him. Rather it was increased thereby; it was intensified; it took on, moment by moment, a new glory and a new sweetness. The stars are brightest when no other light is in the sky; so now, as the shadows deepened, God's love to Jesus shone down from above with a radiance that poured itself into His soul. So far from the Cross acting like an obscuring screen to hide the Father's love, it brought it always nearer, as if with telescopic power. That is the meaning of the amazing word with which our text begins. "*Therefore* doth the Father love Me, because I lay down My life."

Brethren, in one aspect the experience of Jesus Christ, most of all in His atoning passion, is something we can never share. We can only stand afar off, and see God's power wrestling with its great task, and praise Him out of full hearts. We can only say, "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried

our sorrows". He only saves, at a cost we could not pay. But, in another aspect, which too often escapes our notice, His experience is something meant to be shared by every Christian. St. Paul prayed that he might know the fellowship of His sufferings; and you and I must pray that too. And one point at which, as this text shows, we may enter into, and taste the savour of, that fellowship, is in holding fast the love of God when He bids us suffer. How often, when we see temptation approaching, or loss, or painful duty, our first thought is that God has ceased to love us. The more consistent and single-minded a man has been, the more ready that fear is to torture him. For then he can argue with himself—and you know how quick we are to do it—Had I been forgetting God, or wandering far from Him, this thing would have a meaning; but if I have done my best, and if He loves me, why does He try me thus?

Well, if the strain of that sore temptation is weighing on you now, I have only time to say one word about it. Remember that Jesus Christ once stood where you stand, once felt what you feel—how far more keenly, as the only begotten Son!—yet His grasp of God's love never slackened, never failed. Let that be enough for your need. If you cannot with your own eyes see the stars gleam, take Christ's word for it that they are there. Trust His reading of life. Trust His thought of God. If you feel that you are

surrounded by dread mysteries, for whose solution you can only grope feebly, let it be enough for you that Christ knows. Why, that is the very meaning of faith. It is faith to accept His word. It is faith to be satisfied when we learn that He is satisfied. Ah! friends, only let us ask Him, and He will give us this faith by which He Himself lived and died; He will fill us with the tranquil joy which made such a stronghold of His own heart, that though all His enemies smote upon the gate, they could not enter or disturb His peace.

Again we see here *how God values self-sacrifice.* Much of the Bible, as we know, is a record of God's view of selfishness, in all its myriad forms. Well, but in human life there is present much more than selfishness; there has always been, for the Holy Spirit has been always here. This patience and kindness and compassion then, these flowers of a more than earthly grace and loveliness that spring in the garden of human life—what does God think of them? Are they precious in His sight?

"Therefore doth the Father love Me, because I lay down My life"—in these words we have the answer. There we learn how goodness appears to God. For it was as if the Father perceived a new reason for loving Christ in His acceptance of the Cross. Strange things have been said by theologians as to Christ in His passion having drunk the cup of

God's wrath, wrath directed against Him personally; but this text scatters all such fancies like mists of dawn before the sun. Never did God love Jesus more than just then. He had loved Him before, "ere the worlds began to be"; but that ineffable love was magnified and enriched now, as Christ prepared to die, and the great full heart of God overflowed at the sight of His wondrous sacrifice for a world of sin.

Just in passing, may we not dwell one moment upon the amazing proof of God's love *for us* that lies here? If even Christ was loved the more because He died to ransom men, does that not shed a strange, revealing light on the place men have in God's heart? Those jewels must indeed be costly that enhance perfect beauty; and how dear to God are the souls of men if for the sake of their redemption He counts Jesus still more beloved!

But to return to the main point, I ask you to see in this experience of Jesus—who was true man, if infinitely more—a sign and illustration of the value God places on self-sacrifice. A great many things which men covet, or pride themselves on having, enjoy but a low estimate in heaven. If you only go up high enough, the biggest palace in the world is nothing but a speck; and if we put ourselves in thought beside God, it is marvellous how things like money or power shrink and dwindle. Nothing shows great at that altitude but love. The disposition to stoop in

mercy to the weak, the dignity that expresses itself in service, the pity that takes the outcast to its heart, the patience never wearied by refusals; it is this, this most of all, that bulks large in the sight of God and opens the flood-gates of His love. It is the cup of cold water that shall not lose its reward.

And if any man asks what is this reward, I answer that it is just the heightened consciousness that God does love us. You taste the love of God in the measure in which you show love to man. Only the gentle know God's gentleness. The man who is merciless in business, or careless of the wretched, or cruel to the fallen, feels no sweetness in the thought that God loves him. God's pity can enter only at wider doors than his. St. John tells us that over and over again in his Epistle: "if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and in us His love is perfected". And therefore an afternoon spent in service to a neighbour will do more to fill the mind with the consciousness of the Divine mercy than all the books and sermons in the world. "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver." There must be patient faithful mothers, and spent and weary slum-sisters, and missionaries old and grey and broken with toil among the heathen on whose graves Jesus with His own hand will write the epitaph: "Therefore doth the Father love them, because they laid down their lives".

So note, lastly, that *the surrendered life is restored.*

"I lay down My life, that I may take it again." For the sacrifice made by Jesus was not the casting away of a precious thing for ever; it was a stage, rather, in its perfect realisation. He died to rise to a completer life, and to raise the world along with Him. Free in parting with life, He was free also in resuming it. So in due time, He took it out of death's grasp, and as the great conqueror of the tomb flung back its seeming victory. And just as a diver sinks beneath the waves, to rise again to the upper air bearing the gems he went to seek, so Jesus Christ came back from death, not empty-handed, not alone, but bringing many sons unto glory.

There is a principle here for us also. What we give up to God is restored to us more richly. He asks costly oblations not that He may deprive us of them, but that they may come to be ours again in a higher, nobler sense. So it may be the will of God —often it has been—that some one member of a motherless family, whose dreams were of intellectual distinction, should put her ambitions by for the others' sake, and give her life, all unexpectedly, to the care and nurture of the rest. At first it seems the merest ruin and mutilation of a bright career. But how differently it shows afterwards! How often, if God's will be done and Christ's secret learnt, that life grows always wealthier in influence and meaning, till every friend and almost every bystander perceives that its

value for God and man are such as it could have gained in this way only. The corn of wheat has fallen into the earth and brought forth much fruit.

"If you would be perfect," said Emerson, "you must be prepared to suffer." Emerson learnt that from Jesus Christ, nowhere else. It is a truth which Christ has been urging upon men, ever since His own experience as He hung there, dying in the dark, turned out to be its supreme illustration. He gave Himself for us, wherefore also God has given to Him the name that is above every name. That sacrifice, that propitiation for the sins of the whole world, no one can repeat; but it embodies the truth by which, through Him, you and I may live upon our lower plane. Keep back your life, keep it from God, keep it from man, and it will fade and droop till nothing is left except broken hopes and an empty heart. Give it away, give it to God and Christ, and for their sake to the world, and it will come back to you rich and blessed, and crowned with God's love for ever.

XIV

STEPS IN A MIRACLE

He touched his tongue, and looking up to heaven, He sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened.—Mark vii. 33-4.

THIS miracle, recorded only by Mark, has about it some very unusual features. For one thing, our Lord takes the sufferer aside, and works the healing more or less in privacy; again, there is the designed use of the same abnormal means as in another case —the touch of Jesus, and the saliva on His finger; and still further, there follows, after the miracle is done, an urgent injunction of secrecy, laid not only on the recipient of the benefit, but on the spectators.

Any one of these points might reward our study; but this evening I wish to turn your thoughts rather to the words I have read, as containing after all the gist of the description. "He touched his tongue, and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened". And I wish to consider the truths indicated by these words, not

merely as suggesting methods in which Christ redeems men, but also as signalising the lines on which we must imitate Him if our service is to be the channel of His power. We cannot copy Jesus Christ in so far as He is the one Mediator between God and man; but we can copy Him, and we ought to, so far as He was and is a medium of redeeming love to the burdened and the sinful. There is but one sun, peerless monarch of the sky, but there may be an unnumbered host of stars; and the laws of radiating light are in each case the same.

First, then, note *the Christ that touches.* "He put his fingers into his ears; He touched his tongue". Doubtless in the patient there was something which made it advisable to adopt these methods. Possibly the man was at first totally indifferent as to the chance of cure, and very dubious whether anything would come of it all; possibly all the time he was pathetically doing his best to follow Christ's meaning, but with slow faith and dull intelligence. And so Jesus bent down to the level of his feeble trust, employing a stairway of material aids, up which the other's hope and courage might move, to seize and hold the blessing. That was the reason of the insertion of the fingers into the poor, deaf ears; that was the reason why the helpless, stammering tongue was touched and moistened with saliva. These expedients healed, not because of any indwelling virtue,

but because Jesus used them. They were stepping-stones for the halting feet of ignorance and hesitation; and they did their blessed work by making a loving contact between the Lord and a man's need.

How deep often is the significance of a touch, and how cruel a pain may its absence be! The poet's finger was laid on the very pulse of feeling when he wrote :—

> But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
> And the sound of a voice that is still.

It is the symbol of brotherhood, love, companionship; it is the cure of all weakness, loneliness and separation; it throws a bridge from soul to soul, and across there troop messages of sympathy and kind affection. Friendship is begun when man has touched man, for through that electric contact the sense goes thrilling of frank good-will and a kindred mind.

Jesus touched this deaf and dumb man, touched the very seat and organ of his inability, with the purpose of bringing them into such a relation that help was possible; and do we not see here, in a parable, just what He did for all the world? When He came from the heights of glory into the temptations and sorrows of our life, it was in order that He might be very near us. He touched us, that He might grasp our fallen manhood and lift it up. Ah! it

moved the writer of Hebrews profoundly to think how low God's Son had stooped; "verily not of angels doth He take hold, but He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham". Christ in His journey from the Father did not stop half-way. Nothing less than contact with the lost would serve. All the wonder of the Incarnation is, as in a figure, wrapped and enveloped in that one simple act—He touched him.

It is a simple act; yet is it not one that men are often curiously reluctant to do for one another? No torture could be inflicted on some fastidious people half so distressing as to bring them in contact with their less fortunate brethren. How well one knows the instinctive hesitating pause ere the grimy hand of toil is grasped, or the dainty shrinking of a fine lady from commoner fellow-travellers! I have even known of a plague-stricken Indian cantonment where English girls were left to die alone, their parents fled in panic from the hated spot. Sooner than *touch* their own flesh and blood they would have parted with the uttermost farthing. I know, thank God, there are abundant instances of unselfish bravery to balance all the weakness; but still the very admiration rightly accorded to them proves how hard often it is for us to stand beside those in danger or suffering or misery, and lay hold of their need and repulsiveness with a gentle, loving, firm grasp. Father Damien on

his Isle of Lepers; many a slum-sister in her less romantic work in the rookeries of our large towns—what are these, every one, except faint illustrations leading our minds up and up to what Christ did when in His great sacrifice He came down to be numbered with the transgressors?

Friends, Christ touched us; that means that He loved us, for nothing less than love would have brought the Son of God so near. Christ touched us; that means that He is not ashamed to call us brethren, though others may be weary of our failures, and we have sunk very low in our own respect. Christ touched us; that means that He established a relation through which may flow the stream of healing power, lifting us up in union with His own strength and purity. Christ touched us; and therefore we have the assurance that He is real, and is present with us, and in frailty or loneliness we can let the hand of trust go stealing out in the dark to feel for His hand that waits to grasp ours. No fear in solitude, no despair in guilt, no sinking of the heart in temptation, once we have felt the sure, quiet contact of His love.

The lesson in this act of Christ is clear enough for all who are trying to serve Him among men. Very little efficacy or attraction resides in the philanthropy, or even the evangelism, that stands a good way off and addresses the hearer from the safe dis-

tance of holier beings. The zeal that is copious in good advice, but would be alarmed or shocked at the idea of personal contact with the fallen, is not that which devotion to Jesus Christ kindles, or which takes His life for model. There is but one way to help those who need help: to stand at their side, and get hold of their hand, and look into their eyes with the unaffected good-will that will move them to say—Here is a man who has an interest in me, and is going to try his best to do me good. The touch is the secret of the cure.

Secondly, note *the Christ that prays*. Before the deed of power, you mark that word of description, "He looked up to heaven". The glance and thought passed in a moment, yet in the chain of action it was a vital link. Without that upward look, Christ would not have taken the next step; the dumb would have remained dumb. You stand in the engine-room of an ironclad waiting for the signal to go ahead, and at the sharp ring of the telegraph the man beside you touches a handle, scarcely distinguishable in the array of screws and levers; but the movement has liberated mighty forces, and immediately great pistons begin to quiver, and monster shafts to revolve, and the huge vessel goes forging out to sea. That movement, slight yet so effectual, is prayer. It was so even in Christ's life. His concord with the Divine will being absolute, prayer gave Him control

of infinite energies, and He used them to realise the great wise purposes of redemption, and fill the empty lives of men.

The habitual dependence of Jesus Christ on prayer is clear in every line of the Gospels; and I wonder if, after all, anything could bring Him so near to us as that. It was His custom, we know, to seek out solitary places, where the world's clamour could not reach, and He drank in peace from nature's quiet voices. And we too, thank God, have known what it is to speak with the Father in secret. Yes; but Christ was not in secret when He breathed this prayer. There was the patient standing a yard off, with his listless, bewildered face, and a crowd of onlookers edging always nearer. And it was from close beside men, with the multitude pressing round, that Christ lifted up His heart to the Father, and took from Him power to do His blessed work. Perhaps it seemed only a minor occasion in the life of Jesus. It was no crisis, like the Temptation, or the agony in the garden. Nevertheless it was a new piece of the Messiah's work, to be done in the name and in the power of God; therefore, for one moment, His heart rose up like an arrow to heaven.

Is it not a commentary on the value, as well as the meaning, of what the older writers used to call ejaculatory prayer? How natural it may become for us, and how unspeakably rewarding, thus to escape

in one sudden moment from all our weakness and inability, and be filled up to the soul's brim with the strength of God! It is a strange notion, though widely disseminated, that prayer is to be kept for brief, strictly fenced-off periods of the day; and that a stray petition which finds its way into working hours is no better than a trespasser, out of bounds and out of place. In that there is very little wisdom. After all, why should we thus mass and heap our prayers together, night and morning, and leave all the hours between in an unconsecrated, prayerless state? Would you treat an intimate friend like that, giving him one spell of conversation before breakfast and another after supper, but in the interval declining once to open your lips? And if you would not, who is a friend like God or can come so near? Ah! brethren, do not, for want of a little thought, allow yourselves to be cheated out of the joy and gain of thus transporting the heart, and all its concerns, into the presence of God, clear of cares and worries and adversities. This is your wonderful privilege—if I may put it so, it is the miracle you can put in operation perpetually—that you may fall back when you will upon the inviolable peace of that inward citadel. In an instant, wherever you are, threading your way along the street, or talking in the family circle, you may pass from the world into the sanctuary, and, like Jesus, be alone with God. Temptation, I warrant, can

do very little harm to the man who has mastered that secret.

Not only so. Such instantaneous prayers often bring a marvellous accession of wisdom as to how God's kingdom may be served. Do you remember that point in Nehemiah's life, when the Persian king, with whom he was a favourite, asked him what he wished done for the restoration of Jerusalem; and how that sturdy hero of faith saw in a flash that his nation's future hung upon the answer? So, standing there, with the king's wine-cup in his hand, and no respite to collect his thoughts, as he tells us, "I prayed unto the God of heaven"; and the upshot of that dart-like cry for guidance was the epoch-making expedition that built Zion's walls, and reanimated her defenders, and changed history. And every biography or journal in which the inner life of saintly men is unveiled, has the same story to relate of Divine light given them in answer to ejaculatory prayer. To use the crowning argument, remember we have Jesus Christ for model in the practice of it; here too He has left us an example that we should follow His steps.

Again, note *the Christ that pities*. "Looking up to heaven, He sighed." One knows instinctively the feeling which wrung that sigh from Him. It was compassion—compassion for a frail, darkened, broken human life. He felt the pathos of things; the deep

insights of love revealed to Him the neglect and emptiness and pain of this man's history, for in that age such as he had a cruel lot. Here moved the edge of the dark shadow cast by the suffering that engulphs the world on every side, and in the background hung the darker shadow still of sin. So now, like that other day by the graveside of Lazarus in Bethany, Jesus felt overwhelmingly the pitiful estate of man's weakness, and the hostile power of the wasting foes that prey on life. Beside the tomb of His dead friend, Jesus had thought on all these things and wept; and in pity, now, He sighed.

Does it not prove how much the healing ministry cost the Lord? It meant a ceaseless spending of the treasures of His soul. He could not cure men, as we say, automatically; each new case of suffering touched Him to the quick. Not always is it so with men. There is the minister or physician who stands by the bedside of pain and death because he has been sent for, and it is the way he gets his living; and there that other who, so far as may be, shares his brother's pain, and lives in his hopes and fears, and takes up and bears his load; and he it is, though at a long, long distance, that has learned the imitation of Christ.

The practical maxim that emerges here is plain. Express it as you may, it comes to this, that compassion is an unconditional prerequisite of spiritual help-

fulness. There must be something in the worker for God's kingdom—preacher, evangelist, visitor, keeper of the night-refuge—akin to the pity that from all eternity throbbed in the heart of Jesus Christ; pity for those who are fighting a hard battle, pity for the broken captives of sin, pity for all who have wandered so long that now they feel not even the needs Christ would satisfy. In some minds, I know, the sight of the world's evil and sorrow produces only bitterness. As it has been put, "certain qualities in those we are inclined to love daunt us. Insincerity, callousness, selfishness, treachery in its more refined aspects, these are apt to arouse incredulity and at last scorn." See how base man is, they say, when this is what he sinks to; what is this flotsam and jetsam of human life but hopeless pestilential wreckage? But Christ felt no bitterness. He felt pity, He felt sorrow; yes, He felt a great anger that sin should have thus poured ruin on the nature made for God and in His likeness. But never once did He grow hard or contemptuous at the spectacle; instead it stirred Him to an infinite compassion. And something like that it must do for us also, Christian men and women, if we are to represent Jesus among men. When we face sin and sin's dark issues, not in the east-end of our cities merely, but among our friends and in our families, we must not grow hard or cynical or despairing, but seek the pity that is so strong because of an inextinguishable hope.

Remembering that Christ had pity on us, we will have pity on our neighbour. And those whose hand we take, to help and serve them, will divine what we are feeling.

Lastly, note *the Christ that commands*. "He saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened". Is not this the difference between our sympathy and Christ's; ours is but a hope and longing, His can save? And He knew it well; nay, it was the sovereign consciousness of power to speak the liberating word that made His pity, for all its intensity, so calm. The mastery of things was His. There slept in Him the power that had been at the making of human nature, and therefore came with healing might for cure and restoration. He was forever one in will and person with Him who "spake the word and it was done; He commanded and it stood fast".

Brethren, ask yourselves, Is there anything in history even faintly resembling the attitude of Jesus Christ to human need. Mark, it is not the attitude of inquiry; He does not ask questions; the extent, the malignity of the disease is all known before one word is spoken. It is still less the attitude of suggestion; no tentative, cautious diagnosis is offered, no conjecture, no easy promise that if one remedy fail, some other will be tried. Rather it is the attitude of conscious royal command, that utters the very voice of God, and knows that failure is the one thing that

cannot be. The word of Christ is a word creativ and infallible. Past all the doubts and misgivin that crowd in upon men's hearts, and take cruel a vantage of their weakness, there comes that voice love—love almighty, secure, redeeming—and bring the thing to pass.

Now that is Christ's prerogative still; for Him t speak and to do are always one. And just for tha reason, if we have trusted in His salvation, it is ou right to speak the word of authority in His nam Is not that the sequence of thought in His last com mand: All power is given unto *Me*; go *ye* therefor and teach all nations? To-day there are many wh claim to revive the privileged right of the priest t declare the forgiveness of sins; and what is tha except simply a debased and vulgarised form of th glorious truth that every son of man, who has taste that the Lord is gracious, has the right, and is calle to offer peace with God through Christ to ever maimed and halt and burdened sinner at his side Not for us the tones of dubious inquiry; not for u the hesitating peradventure; rather let us catch th accent of the Lord Himself, and urge the message eternal life with animating and triumphant certaint "The Spirit and the bride say, Come; and let ever one that heareth say, Come".

So, friends, though Jesus Christ is Lord of all, s high above our stumbling imperfection, we can h

His followers in the task of saving men ; and He asks us to be so. Like Him we may touch the needy, like Him we may gain power by prayer, like Him we may pity the sinful, like Him we may speak the word of Divine power over guilt and woe. Remember it is the service He appointed us. "As the Father hath sent Me into the world, so send I you."

XV

AGE AND YOUTH

Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died. And Joash the king of Israel came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said, O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof.—2 Kings xiii. 14-19.

THIS is the last hour in a prophet's life. The brave, simple-hearted Elisha, now past eighty years, has lain down to die. He had been not prophet merely, but patriot; and the nation's grief was the more bitter that at this juncture he could ill be spared. Repeatedly in the past he had stepped between Israel and the vengeance of her foes; even now, as he lay waiting for the end, his parting thoughts were given to his country. They must have been sad enough. Israel was in a gravely disturbed condition. Oppressed by the powerful Syrian state, she was also cruelly harassed by the marauding bands of Moab. How the dying man must have gone back in fancy to that day, nearly fifty years since, when he had summoned Jehu to the throne, and, with the animating dreams and hopes of a new start, sped him forth upon his vigorous career! But all had been in vain.

Jehu's sons were weak and pusillanimous; and while they reigned the Syrians had trodden Israel's honour in the dust.

Then came what seemed a turning of the tide. Joash, the grandson of Jehu, became king, and the change from the degraded imbecility of his father was very welcome. There was promise in the youth's unwasted energies. And the old prophet, as he looked a long farewell that day to the streets and valleys of Samaria, found himself questioning of what stuff this new leader was made and whether he had it in him to retrieve the national fortunes. Had he the brave purpose, the iron faith, the unselfish and untiring keenness of spirit, which would lift the kingdom out of the slough of impotence and starvation where it lay? Had he the vision of God that makes a man strong?

Joash, as far as we know, appears to have turned out in nature somewhat colourless. He was by no means the worst of the kings of Israel; but if there was no great harm in him, neither was there any great good. The main accusation urged against him is that he failed to stop the public idolatry his ancestors had set up. Well, purely negative persons do not greatly help the world. Possibly they may now and then act as a drag when down-hill speed in morals or religion is on the increase; yet since they hinder upward progress still more, the world's gain

is less than nothing. We all know a sort of person who sides with righteousness for a time, and then, to avoid partisanship and keep the balance even, goes into opposition. He has no belief in pushing things too far. More harm, in his view, has been done by reforming fanaticism than by anything else. He is always repeating that every question has two sides, with good arguments for either; and when some evil thing clamours for suppression, and men's minds are kindling, "Can't you leave it alone," he will say, "few gains are worth the trouble". The man is negative only; he is neither hot nor cold; and how Christ spoke of such persons in the Apocalypse we all remember. Brethren, if when the great issues of right and wrong are canvassed no one knows where we stand, if we live without convictions lest we should seem partisan, if our neighbours would be at a loss to say whether we believed in Christ or not, the world, it is only too certain, will be none the richer for our presence. And what is more, we are adding terribly to the chances that the Gospel and our conscience will never come together. If you have ever seen a vessel try to moor at a pier on which stood no one competent to take the ropes, you have had a very fair illustration of the difficulty which truth about God has to face in entering the negative mind. Nothing but the ghost of manhood is left if passionate conviction be withdrawn.

For the present, however, the instincts of the young king were high. With faith to put them in action, he might have opened a new epoch in Israel's history. Here he is, then, a youth of promise and possibility, standing at the bed-side of the old man. There is always an interest, often a deep pathos, in the spectacle of youth and age side by side; but never, surely, so full a pathos, as when the guiding-reins are slipping from the old man's hand, and being gathered up in the young man's eager grasp. For many a year Elisha had been the ruling spirit of Israel, ceaselessly striving to get the will of God done within the four corners of the land. And now, it may be, he felt dimly that the Lord was taking him away from evils to come; at all events, no great prophet survived on whom he might cast the mantle bequeathed him by Elijah. Joash would have to live his own life. On which side—the question came back over and over again—on which side would his power and influence be flung? Would he show himself a man of principle, with a soul loyal and high? Old as he was, Elisha would fain have had a few years more, if only to stamp the right impression on the era just dawning.

So let us take the two figures in this scene. One is leaving the stage; the other has just stepped upon it. Consider first *the prophet on his death-bed.* On such a theme it is possible to have many thoughts,

but this at least is worth specific mention, that Elisha was very old. To us this may seem a tolerably insignificant fact, but for Israel to have had so long in their midst a great man of God, who spoke God's word fearlessly, was an unimaginable blessing. There is a proverb that "those the gods love die young"; fortunately a good deal less true than proverbs mostly are. If all who believe in God and righteousness, all the loving, all the patient, all the pure and meek and brave and holy, died young; whereas all the mean and low and base among us, all the pitiless and selfish, all the vicious and evil-minded, lived long and died hard—why, the goodness of the world would fail, and for a young soul to acknowledge Christ would be felt as sealing his death-warrant. It would be harder than ever for men to cast themselves on God, in the great choice that fixes all things. But the Father is kinder far than this. It is His will that the gospel of life and peace should make its way by the channel of human influence; therefore, in unnumbered instances, He has provided that the presence of a holy character, fed from unseen springs, should last on through youth, middle life, extreme age, confessed and loved as more beautiful and mellow with every added year. Indeed, an old tradition relates that Jesus Himself passed through every stage of life, "becoming," as the ancient writer says, "an old man for old men, that

He might be a perfect Master for all"; and although the tradition, as we know, is mistaken, yet does it not point to an instinct which in its own place is trustworthy? Do not we all feel it more impressive by far to listen to the tested, solid narrative of the veteran's experience than to the fiery raptures of the novice; to the man whose conflict is behind him than to one who has yet to win his spurs? "I have been young, and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken"; in such a testimony there is something irrefragable that does not sink beneath our feet. Each ripe life of spiritual integrity is a fact against which the tide of unbelief will break itself in vain. It is a fact which cannot be denied, whatever else may be in doubt; and it proves, not in words merely but in the realities of life, that the promises of a faithful and unchangeable God are the best security of all, and that out of the poor and broken materials even of a sinner's past the indwelling power of Jesus Christ can build a temple of beauty and endurance.

Then besides that, it is an exceptional feature in Elisha's end, that he was a prophet, and yet died at peace in his bed. Death comes usually to such as he in other ways. Too often the man who spoke fearlessly for God has paid for his courage with his life. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that were sent unto thee." Thus St. Paul must kneel at last outside the walls of

Rome under the sword's sharp edge; at Florence they sent Savonarola to the stake to expiate a quenchless zeal for righteousness; John Hus was burnt because he preached the message of free grace to a day and a Church that would not hear it. And even our Lord Jesus Christ, not only Priest and King to His people, but Prophet also—He too came to His own, and with wicked hands they crucified and slew Him. Does not history, as we look back, appear to confirm the poet's estimate:

> Truth for ever on the scaffold,
> Wrong for ever on the throne?

Does the death-grapple not seem always to end one way? Nevertheless, at times we find a bright exception, where a faithful God, keeping watch above His own, has sent light at even-tide. Here and there, like Elisha in Samaria, Luther in his cottage at Eisleben, Knox in his quiet house at Edinburgh, a great man of God breathes his last in peace. After life's fever the close arrives calm and tranquil, and the weary sun makes a golden set.

As I look again at this old-world scene, I find yet another point worth our noting. Here is a poor apartment in Samaria—the London of the country—in which lies a dying man, without money, without fame, without striking powers of mind, his sole weapon "the word of the Lord". Yet the king stands beside him mournfully, filled with honest

sorrow, and knowing in his heart that, with his passing, Israel's best hope would have departed. "O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof." His tears might well fall. The true benefactors of a nation—who are they? Not the men who paint the map red, or invent a new big gun; but those who stir its sleeping conscience, and quicken its desire for the living God, and offer it those abiding and infinite satisfactions that will quench its nobler thirst. And in Elisha this has been the true nobility, the simple grandeur of the man, that for two generations he stood among his people as an incorruptibly brave witness to eternal things, with a life that did not sink beneath his message.

Men and women, goodness never quite fails to touch and convince mankind. Joash was no deeply religious nature, yet the old man's dignity and godliness laid a spell upon him. We are all enriched by a life in which God's presence is seen moving; we know, without reasoning, that it makes a difference; and when death veils it, we feel ourselves, somehow, impoverished and weak. Find one such life—nor are they so uncommon—and you have all you need to disprove the things which base men say; that every man has his price, that conscience and virtue are cant, that trust in God is but the tattered cloak of selfishness. Who can measure or compute the value of one consistent life as the demonstration of God's

sanctifying fellowship with men? Who can say how much we owe, each one of us, to the fact that we have known those whose presence has "shamed the bad, and made the good better, and been felt at times like the presence of God Himself?"

> Only the actions of the just
> Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.

Let us now turn to the younger man, and note the elements of moral promise in him. I like him for having paid this seemly homage to the old prophet. Is it not the case that admiration for good men is an avenue by which great blessings reach the soul? Next time you are engaged in self-examination, how might this serve as a searching form of scrutiny—Do I venerate the best men whom I know? Do I rejoice in every one who is like Christ, and in every one who desires to be like Him? Am I quick to perceive and do honour to a noble trait in my neighbour; or am I sceptical regarding it, bitter, suspicious, willing to hint or to favour a less creditable explanation? Believe me, these are larger matters than we dream. Only let a man grow blind to the best that is in his fellows, and he will soon have no eyes for the love of God. On the other hand, let a man sink never so low, if only he cherishes still the faculty to discern and admire excellence in those around him, it is actually as though in that defiled and barren life Christ had left some

furnishings behind, as a pledge of His return some later day, to take possession. So be on your guard against the man who would sap your faith in human virtue; he has some design on your conscience; therefore give him no quarter or you will repent it.

Then again, Joash was gentle and teachable with Elisha, who had obviously a more than kindly feeling for his visitor. He bade him take a bow; and the sight was a strange one as the younger man obeyed, and the prophet laid trembling fingers on his sinewy hands. Joash knew far more of archery than Elisha, yet he gave way readily as if he had been a boy that never drew a bow before. Then the lattice-window was thrown back, and as the arrow leapt from the string, and whistled eastward, the voice of the seer rose high in a note of triumph. "The arrow of the Lord's deliverance," he cried, "the arrow of deliverance from Syria."

So far all augured well. It is not usual, nor even in one sense is it natural, for the young to submit themselves without murmuring to what, perhaps, they are tempted to call the whimsical vagaries of the old. It is so easy to declare that the world has changed since their day; to speak with condescension of slow and obsolete methods; to smile at their growing infirmities and lack of understanding. And in all this there may be no grave harm. Nevertheless, I should question whether a trait of character can be named

which more infallibly indicates strength and excellence of mind than affectionate deference to the aged. I should question whether a sort of action is discoverable which is better calculated to gain the onlooker's confidence and regard than an act of courtesy to the old. There are those whose minds appear to be obsessed by the strange delusion that flippant or disrespectful behaviour to the aged has in it something fascinating and attractive; yet if they only marked their own instinctive feeling at the sight of the same demeanour in others they would speedily clear their minds of that hallucination. To all right-minded people any lack of consideration for the old is an extremely grave offence; and that it is so to more than man is indicated by that noble commandment of ancient Israel: "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man; I am the Lord".

So far, I say, Joash's conduct augured well; but before the scene was over his besetting weakness of character had appeared. It was a fatal lack of energetic faith—the same radical defect which has proved the bane of many a life of promise. After the fine piece of symbolism I have described, the king is again bidden take a sheaf of arrows, and smite upon the ground. A strange command, we say; but that is merely because the Hebrew mind is different from ours. In the Old Testament we find prophets, often,

performing symbolic acts which are not merely predictive, but, if I may say so, actually productive of the future. So the shooting of the arrows on the ground was an emblematic act, the significance of which must have been understood by Joash perfectly well. His halting after the third time, consequently, was a trifle, but to the watcher's keen eye it betrayed a weakness that would bring disaster some day.

The main task set to Joash at this time was to clear the country of the Syrian troops; and in like manner, my brothers, the main task God is setting you and me is to clear our lives of moral evil. Now, the crucial question about a man who has entered on that great business is this, Will he persist, or will he break down after a few encounters, and resign himself to the old bondage? Remember, it is not the beginning that tests us; it is the perseverance called for later. The seed flung on stony places rooted and sprang up no less than the seed on good ground; it was their after history that proved so different. Just so in the fight with the world, the flesh, and the devil, the man is rare indeed who has not struck one blow for liberty; the distinction is not there; rather it is between those who have renewed their fainting strength at the fountain of all power and all safety, and so battled on to the end, and those who, after a brief half-hearted struggle, have surrendered and laid down their arms. The one smite Syria and then

are smitten; the other smite Syria until they have consumed it.

Take a particular sin, some evil cancer eating into a human life, and getting nearer aad nearer to the vitals; take such a sin and apply this test to it. If a man wakes up some morning to find this thing in him, possessing, suffusing, encircling his life; what is his first duty, to be done instantly and at all costs? To deal with it energetically. To refuse to let it settle down quietly in a corner; to get to close quarters with it, and resolve not to rest till the work is done. Nothing matters unless he can track it down and bring it to bay. Plutarch tells of a Spartan who, as he set out for battle, complained to his mother that his sword was too short. "Then get one step nearer," she said. Ah, friends! there lies the reason why so many of us have sins hanging about them which ought to have been exterminated long ago; they have not gone near enough. They have planned drastic measures; they have announced to themselves that they were just going to begin; in hours of remorse they have vowed that something must be done; but still the evil thing haunts and destroys them as of old.

And the other essential of victory is faith. For the staunchest fighter soon grows weary; he soon has need to restore again the virtue that has gone out of him in the conflict. So you and I want to get into, and

to keep in, touch with the unfailing springs of joyous and buoyant courage provided for us in Jesus Christ. If we make the love of God, revealed and pledged to us in Him, our base of operations in the long campaign of self-conquest, maintaining unbroken connections with Him who is the Leader of all the faithful, then the work which He has appointed, and in which His grace sustains us, will be done at last and done for ever. Nothing can defeat the man who knows and believes that God is his Father, and Christ his Elder Brother, and that the Holy Spirit dwells within. He must be conqueror in the end, for he draws strength and wisdom not from success merely, but from failure. Reverses will teach him humility but not despair; for he, like pilgrim Christian in the Valley, can still cry with faith unmoved, "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy; though I fall, I shall arise".

XVI

GOD'S USE OF SIN.

Thou makest me to possess the iniquities of my youth.—Job xiii. 26.

One of the commonest ideas regarding sin, at the present time, is that when once done, it is also done with. Half the human race persist in viewing sin as no more than a conventional name applied by religious people to the minor slips of life's journey, mere blunders and peccadilloes scarcely worth mentioning, which anyhow leave no trace behind them. They would stare at the suggestion that sin becomes a living bit of ourselves. If some bad habit, like cheating or vanity or drunkenness, begins to get the upper hand, and too much obtrudes its presence, they imagine that there is no more difficulty in dropping it out of the character quietly than when a train shunts a heated waggon into a siding. Only speak the word, and the power of the past is broken.

Men have so great a capacity for shutting their eyes to facts, especially if the facts are disagreeable,

that nothing in that line can surprise us, and yet this conception of sin is surprising. It contradicts the actualities of life so flatly. Take the great literature of fiction, for example; is there a subject on which the strongest novels dwell more unceasingly than just this, that sin tracks the sinner down unerringly, and at last runs him to earth a doomed man? Occasionally, of course, novels get far away from life, and soar into the vapours of unreal sentiment; but in this case, so far from anything of the kind, they keep peculiarly close to human experience. If proof is wanted, only watch the vivid interest,—the solemn excitement, so to speak—with which people read a story dealing with the vengeance of sin in a graphic and convincing way. A man need not be a Christian; he need not believe in God; let him only use his eyes, and observe life thoughtfully, and he will acknowledge that to talk about getting rid of sin as a simple thing is pure self-deception. The problem is too profound and awful for easy remedies. No short and facile method is adequate to the situation, and men feel this, instinctively, even as they try to believe the falsehoods current on the subject.

The Revisers have introduced one alteration in the text which brings it into line with a favourite idea of our own time. In their translation it reads: "Thou makest me to *inherit* the iniquities of my youth". To-day books on natural science or ethics are

saturated with this conception of heredity. A recent writer says of our democratic generation that "it writes, it preaches, it talks, it thinks biologically; and with the result among others that the idea of Heredity has been lodged beyond displacing in the mind of the average man". Well, the great minds of Scripture had grasped that idea also; their sense of the continuity of life was at least as keen as ours. And yet what this verse speaks of is not the continuity of life in the generations, but the continuity of life within the individual's history. Not heredity between parent and child, but heredity between our early and our later years, between the youth and the grown man. Your present is direct heir of your past. The man of forty is legatee of the man of twenty. The estate is handed down undiminished—nature takes care of that; there is no waste in the process; the legacy is yours without one farthing of abatement. We spend our years, the Psalmist writes, "as a tale that is told," and if there is anything essential to a tale it is this, surely, that later chapters shall inherit and carry on the substance of what preceded. Just so, in our existence there are no sudden ruptures, no fortuitous transformations, no inexplicable gaps in the connected whole. The story all hangs together. Yesterday persists in to-day, and lays already its moulding hand upon to-morrow.

Of course this is a two-sided principle; it has a

bright as well as a dark aspect. Life is as continuous for the saint as for the sinner. The laws of the universe are on the side of the good man; "the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day". Such is the constitution of the world that it accelerates the pilgrim's progress, once his face is set to the Celestial City. Spiritual power grows at compound interest. No earnest aspiration, no true thought or loving act can be lost, but retains an influence for ever and ever. All that in men which is just, pure, patient, Christ-like is funded for them in their own character by a faithful Creator. He makes them to inherit the *obedience* of their youth.

But what I wish to do now is to contemplate the other, and sterner, aspect of this law, which bears upon the persistence of moral evil. For the breeze that carries one ship swiftly on its way may, if the helm be awry, drive another straight on the rocks. So let us face squarely this fact that sin *sticks*; long after we thought to have escaped from it, it is there. All the evil things we have done, or long to do even when we were afraid, have registered themselves silently in the life-tissues of the soul. Our memories may forget, but our nature never does. An indelible record is being kept; "year by year, moment by moment, all is taken down, but in complete silence". If we can say no more of past sins than that they *are*

past, if our youthful transgressions are only forgotten, but not cleansed, then they are still as real, as living, as ruinous as we saw them to be ten minutes after their commission. You know that as well as I. Now and then comes a gust of shameful recollection, as some old familiar object stimulates the fancy; on the other side of the street we catch a glimpse of a face that carries us back five, ten, fifteen years, and reconstructs the former sin as vividly and hauntingly as though it had happened this afternoon. The act we flung into the grave, and stamped down the earth on, rises up from the dead and claims us once again.

The cool observer declares that all this is quite natural; he will indeed furnish you with credible explanations of it, drawn from standard works on psychology. The novelist finds it rich in powerful and dramatic situations. The moralist theorises on the value of conscience to society, in driving men by inward terrors to confess crime. I grant that what they say is all true enough; yet in comparison with the Bible its truth is superficial and elementary. And the Bible goes deeper, because it explains the ultimate ground and purpose of the fact that men realise sin later in this fashion. It is all *God's* doing. He is personally active in the working of these mental laws. And in Christ we know that although it may at first seem harsh and merciless in God thus to thrust the

evil legacy upon the sinner, yet the purpose is one of pure compassion. Like the surgeon with no time to lose, God must first be cruel to the transgressor, that at the last He may be kind.

Let me speak now of four ways in which God makes us to inherit our iniquities. They are closely bound up with each other, but we may consider them briefly in separation.

First, our sins come back on us as *bitter memories*. I need not stay to prove this; universal experience has made it self-evident. While a man yet possesses the relics of conscience; even if his being is involved in badness to the last fibre—every nerve in his body, every tissue of his brain, the very springs of thought tainted and defiled—still I say, while the shreds of a heart and conscience persist, some things he has done, which have gone to make him what he is, must now and then thrill him with pain. Thank God, that is how we have been made; we are not so desperately left to ourselves but that sins, certain sins at all events, do pain us. These bad deeds or thoughts leave poisoned wounds; they leave stains that burn as well as soil; even if there were no God, still we should feel them a disgrace to manhood. And perhaps of all the feelings that visit the human heart none is sadder than the helplessness with which we behold time flowing on resistlessly, bearing with it into the past wrong-doing we can never now set right. No

power on earth is able to recall the once committed wrong. "Four things," says the Arab proverb, "come not back—the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, the neglected opportunity". The author dreams that, were his book still in his power, he would brighten that dull page or clinch that feeble argument; the painter longs for another hour before his finished canvas, brush in hand, that he might touch that cheek with a yet lighter grace, or deepen the shadow in a robe; but what are these to the yearnings of a soul that has sinned against the light, and knows the transgression gone beyond recall? If he has soiled his life with moral defilement, if by selfishness or folly he has lost for ever opportunities of goodness, if above all he has done irremediable injury to the bodies or souls of others, and let loose a stream of evil influence whose windings he can never more control, how piercing and yet how vain must be his sorrow as he longs that time's wheel could roll backward, and that fatal hour be his to live anew!

Let men say what they will, these things are facts to all who are not completely lost to conscience and honour. Forget for a moment what you have done against yourself; think only of what you have brought upon others. You can remember unkind or even cruel acts done to friends now gone beyond the reach of penitence; possibly you can even remember shame

brought on those who trusted you. Is it any use to talk, as people do, as if such sin were merely negative, like the shadow that goes along with sunshine? Are unkindness, lying, treachery, impurity negative; are they only imperfect or undeveloped forms of goodness? Is it true to say that we have merely failed to benefit those around us as we might have done? Not so; when we refuse to palter with conscience we know that we have harmed them; we have hurt their souls, and sometimes—God forgive us!—we meant to hurt them. These things come back on us as bitter memories of irreparable evil that no tears can wash away.

Or again, there are times and places, are there not, for many of us, of which sin has rendered the recollection intolerably full of pain? That week or month in an otherwise happy year; that visit to nature's sweetest scenes; that room, that street, that company; can we bear to recall them without wincing? What is it that for us has robbed them of the nobleness or charm they had at first from God; what is it that now wraps them in an air of gloom, and often makes us wish that by some miracle of merciful omnipotence these periods might be blotted from the past—what but the memory of our transgression? Moments come, indeed, when we are tempted to say, What matters it though now I have repented and turned to God? Are not these sins, these wrongs done to

those who loved me, written as with a pen of iron on a rock?

Ah! my brothers, could we only feel this beforehand, how would it hold us back in hours of weakness or of passion!

Secondly, our sins come back on us as *disqualifying infirmities.* It is common knowledge that a man may so live that he becomes unfit for certain kinds of delicate and important work; his hand shakes, his eyesight deteriorates, and he has to step down in the scale of industry, and adopt some lower form of employment. Never more in this world, perhaps, will he be fit for his old business. Now the same thing may happen in the moral and spiritual life. Sin may be pardoned, while yet punishment remains. "Thou wast a God that forgavest, but Thou tookest vengeance on their inventions." Moses, for his sin, had to lie down in a lonely grave outside the Promised Land, after one look at the country others were entering. David, because of his blood-stained hands, was refused permission to build God's temple. So, like these men, we may shut ourselves out by sin from certain fields of usefulness or enjoyment. There are consequences of sin, bodily and spiritual, effects on the physique, the imagination, the emotions, the capacity for certain kinds of noble activity, which remain with us long after we have become better men. Something in us is burnt out by self-indulgence,

which it is scarcely possible to replace while life lasts. Even after the fetters have been struck off, and we are out in the sunshine, it is hard to recover completely the old freedom of movement. I tell you sin would not be sin if it did not steal that which cannot quite be restored. If in youth we waste our opportunities, or soil our innocence, or misspend our early powers, or yield habitually to the temptation of deceit, then, whatever happens later—and much may happen—there has been irrecoverable loss already. The young can bring gifts to Christ for which there is no substitute. And besides that, it will always be more difficult to appreciate certain lofty experiences of religion; always there will be some Promised Land we shall never enter here. Not that we may not taste the joys of pardon. Not that God will not save to the uttermost. But the effects of moral evil may sink in so deeply that they leave incapacitating infirmities, and even a Christian man, conscious of the fact in his penitential humility, must go halting all his days because of the evil past.

Once more, our sins come back as *guilty burdens*. Now at this point I can imagine some of you urging an objection. We listened, they might say, while you spoke about memories and disqualifications; for of course it is useless to deny that *they* are facts. But guilt is another matter. To describe men as guilty is a huge assumption, which stands greatly in need

of justification. Is not science teaching us daily that we are simply what parentage and circumstance have made us, shaped by these influences like clay in the potter's hands? And in that case what significance can be attached to "guilt," save as a conventional symbol which no one now understands literally?

All that is true, I grant at once, and frankly, provided only we are quite sure of two things. First, that we have no moral freedom; secondly, that there is no God. To quote a recent book: "If freedom and responsibility are illusions, the humane and rational thing will be to exhort the gambler, who grieves too late over his wife's broken heart, not to distress himself over a circumstance for which he is no more answerable than for the state of the weather". Because he is a danger to society, you may punish a man for crime, just as you would crush a savage beast; but you must not speak of his responsibility. That is the argument; and all I need to say about it is that it never was really believed by anyone, and never will be. We are so made that, without reasoning, we see the falsity of such a view. One does not argue about first principles of conscience.

The other assumption necessary before guilt can be dismissed as non-existent is that there is no God. Into the theoretical aspect of that question I cannot

enter now; but I would point out this very practical consideration that, just because sin is real only in relation to God, the being of such a God as Christ revealed—holy, loving, and eternal—is at once the sinner's danger and his hope. If there is no God we need have no fear of His condemnation; no, but also we can have no hope of His salvation. If at first there seems a wonderful relief in having flung overboard traditional ideas about sin and guilt, second thoughts exhibit a loss far more than outweighing the gain. If there is no one to whom I can turn and say, "Father, I have sinned before heaven and in Thy sight," then the prospect of redemption is gone for ever.

Now the startling thing about this theory of the automaton-like character of man, and hence of the unreality of sin, is that it is continually being refuted, not by argument, but by the personal interposition of God. A man may be living in moral scepticism—whether imbibing it unconsciously or adopting it with deliberation—when all at once a strange thing happens. Over and over again I have known it happen. Suddenly his guilt comes home to him and is acknowledged without a murmur. The cause may be one of a thousand things—the sight of holiness in a friend, some one's death, a whisper of kindness in his sorrow, an autumn sunset, a stray word in a gospel address. After all, the proximate

occasion hardly matters; what does matter is the fact that in it, and by means of it, God Himself is speaking. Past all intermediaries and instruments His own voice comes, with its authoritative "Thou art the man. Guilty *then*, thou art guilty still."

Yes; these burdens we long to cast away, or dream that they will remove with the lapse of time, but God's hand binds them again inexorably on our shoulders. He does it in love and pity, doubtless; but assuredly He does it. Time never wears out sin's guilt. To-day in the Egyptian sands they are finding manuscripts two thousand years old; and when the skilled expert pours the reagent over the papyrus surface the old writing stands out again, bold and clear; and God can do that with a human soul. He can give the startled conscience a telescopic and a microscopic power which makes past sins present and small sins great. There may be some one now listening to me to whom He is bringing home this guilty inheritance from the long past, and who is thrusting it away with all his might, in angry fear. My friend, your hope lies in accepting it. You must own your sin before you can disown it. You must go back along the way you have come, and find the place where the iniquity was done, and say frankly: "This sin is mine. I am guilty, and in God's sight I repent." I beseech you to retrace your steps, to take

that burden up, and carry it patiently to the foot of the Cross.

Lastly, our sins come back as *motives to seek God's mercy*. And here at last we light upon the hidden purpose operating in all the other uses God makes of our transgressions. For remember, the most important thing about sin is not its power of embittering memory, or its disqualifying consequences, or even its burden of guilt; the most important thing about sin is this, that it can be forgiven. The prodigal son had been dissolute and reckless; but then the prodigal son had a father. That changed all the outlook. I am not speaking now of what it cost God to be able to forgive; *that* we learn at Calvary. But to realise that there is forgiveness with God, if men take in something of its wonder, enables them to deal with sin, when felt as actual, in the only right and redeeming way. For there are two wrong ways of regarding sin, levity and despair; the one declaring that forgiveness is unnecessary, the other protesting that forgiveness is impossible, and that we have no choice but to carry our burden to the end without hope or relief. And the one right way is just trustful penitence, just coming back to God, like the lad in the parable, and saying, "Father, I have sinned, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son". Surely nothing but the loving wisdom of God could have devised such a use for our past transgressions as thus to lead us back, penitent

and thankful, by their means, to His reconciling mercy.

How many are rejoicing in God's love to-day, all over the world, just because, years ago perhaps, He brought in upon their conscience this heritage of their past selves, forcing them to acknowledge it as theirs, and to deal with Him about it. Friends, when God compels you to accept delivery of your own iniquities, and to face Himself against whom they were committed, that is the truest token of His compassion, though it may seem the cruellest kind of judgment. It is the one path by which even He can guide you to blessedness. Nothing else makes us so ready to welcome Christ. And nothing is so likely to keep us, in after days, contritely dependent on Him alone.

Believe me, there is no other way in which forgiveness can be ours. Not a whisper of pardon will you hear from a godless universe, or the dumb and impersonal mechanism of nature's laws. And no flattering unction we can lay to our own souls, or the medicine of philosophy or literature, is of the least avail to stanch the gaping wounds of conscience; man is too great, his malady too sore to be cured that way. We must be able to speak to One who hears us, and against whom we have transgressed. If we turn to Him, our Father Redeemer, and lay hold of Him in believing prayer, the answer

we yearn for will surely come. "Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by transgression! Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption. Bless the Lord, O my soul; who forgiveth all thine iniquities".

XVII

FAITH AND VIRTUE

Add to your faith virtue.—2 Peter i. 5.

THIS familiar verse has been altered considerably in the Revised Version, where it is given in the form: "In your faith supply virtue, and in your virtue knowledge, and in your knowledge temperance," and so on. Some one has said that this rendering proved how little the Revisers knew of English prose; but however that may be, at all events their translation does give us a clue to the writer's real meaning. The older form has the preposition "to" throughout—"add to your faith virtue," and the rest; so that virtue, knowledge and temperance, were made to appear as separate, detached things, each of which could be tied or stuck on to the others. "*In* your faith supply virtue" means something different. It means that faith is the root from which virtue grows up. These graces, in short, are not ready-made articles, which we can appropriate and use mechanically, like the dressed and polished blocks of stone one sees in a builder's yard. Instead, they are as

closely related as the members of a live body. They flourish together, and they decay together; so near is the affinity and sympathy between them. A man who lacked any one of them entirely could have no real share in any other; just as a chain, one link of which is broken, will bear no weight whatever, be the other links ever so strong. He who has no patience, or no temperance, or no brotherly love is not merely an imperfect Christian; he is not a Christian at all.

So that it would be a good deal more true—though of course every metaphor breaks down somewhere—to say that the reciprocal connections of these graces are like those between the parts of a living tree. The twig sprouts from the branch, the branch runs down into the trunk, and the trunk stands broad-based upon the roots. In the same way, these verses give us the family tree of the Christian graces. Very likely the writer had no thought of the time-order in which they appear; time has comparatively little to do with such matters. He sets them before us rather in the order of their natural relationship. Each acts upon all, and all commence simultaneously. Brotherly kindness is near the foot of the list, and temperance is near the top; yet they were born the same hour.

The list begins with the relations of faith and virtue. "In your faith supply virtue." Now the hard and what may frequently seem the pedantic work of get-

ting at the precise shade of meaning in Scriptural words and phrases always proves rewarding. So let us note some lessons and impulses that rise naturally out of a study of the language here.

Note, first, that *faith is the root from which the graces spring.* By faith, I need hardly remind you, the writer means faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The trustful apprehension of God's unspeakable gift, of the mercy which rose over the world like a bright dawn when the Redeemer came—that is what he intends by the word. This is worth mentioning; for it is not uncommon to speak of faith abstractly, as no more than a hopeful, positive, serious way of regarding life. But when the New Testament writers say "faith," they mean, quite definitely, faith in contact with its proper object, Christ, and becoming only through that contact a strong triumphant thing. Now and then religion is talked of as though it were but the reaching out of an empty hand gropingly and tentatively into vacancy, like some timid insect waving helpless feelers in the air. That is not our situation. True, there was a time, a time of long grief and pain consumed in experiment and exploration; but it was closed at last; closed, too, not half so much by man's finding God as by God's finding and redeeming man. In Jesus the Father has come amongst us, near enough to be touched, near enough to be grasped; and that touch, that grasp, is faith.

Faith heads the list, then, as we have seen, but you will observe that properly it does not belong to the list at all. The writer does not say "add faith" —add it, that is, to something still more fundamental and primary. He assumes that faith is there from the beginning, as the basis of the whole subsequent construction. That is just to say, is it not, that only Christians can develop Christian graces? If you want the flowers, you must have the roots, and the roots must be placed in a favourable soil. Any gardener will tell you that certain plants need a particular kind of mould if they are ever to be anything better than sickly-looking weeds; and people who neglect these precautions, or try to coerce nature into their methods, have to pay for it next summer by having no flowers. Just so there is one soil, and only one, in which temperance and patience and godliness will take root and flourish, and that is a heart that has trusted Christ as Redeemer and bowed to him as King and Lord. So, if any of you have been trying, as I have no doubt you have, to mend your own character and reform yourselves, remember there is a far better way than that. You have started at the wrong end, and the blunder is sure to make a tedious labour out of what ought to be a pure delight. The lamp will only burn if you have poured in the oil. Apply that principle now, and it will revolutionise everything. The look of

faith to Jesus Christ, and the grasp of faith on His saving power—these are the secrets that place you at the proper angle for becoming the men you long to be.

Nowadays we hear much of "character," and of that we can never hear too much; it is the one thing worth taking out of life when it is time to go. The principles by which true character can be attained, and the surroundings favourable to its well-being, are matter of infinite moment for every serious mind. And to-day, in the slums of our great cities, noble-hearted men and women are toiling and planning, day and night, to fill the environment of sunken people there with rational interests and elevated amusements, in the hope of raising them to pure and reputable life. God forbid that any of us, who probably are not doing half so much, should speak one word in cold criticism of methods; all methods are required, so bewilderingly vast is the problem. At the same time, let us be well assured that in all the world only one secret exists for producing the purest and loftiest character, and that is personal faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing else puts us in immediate touch with Divine power. Nothing else uplifts us above ourselves. Nothing else has in it the sure promise of abundant victory. And only that man, in search of true nobility of nature, has the certain hope of arriving at his goal who has learnt to

say, "I will go in the strength of the Lord: I will make mention of Thy righteousness, even of thine only."

Clearly, therefore, this requirement of faith is no accident. Not a few people think that while faith, no doubt, is actually the method by which men are saved, some other method might have been adopted, if God had only chosen to appoint it so. But chance arrangements of that kind have no place in Christianity. If life eternal, with all its fruitfulness and beauty, does come as a pure gift from God, then on our side there must be an outstretched hand, or nothing is accomplished. How can a Gospel benefit the man who will not believe it? How can he hope to stand if he will not put his foot to the ground? Very simple problems, these, in common life; and the chief problems in personal religion are just as simple. If there is no faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ, no consent of the will, no outgoing of the heart, no yielding of the whole nature, then the great result cannot follow. So it is useless to look up to, and covet, this beautiful cluster of graces if we are unwilling to fulfil the conditions and to commence at the commencement. Christ's gifts are ours only as we take Christ Himself.

Secondly, note that *faith is essentially prospective.* We have seen that it is the beginning of the Christian life, and the permanent underlying ground of

progress; but what we need to realise now is this, that the greatness of faith lies quite as much in what it is to be, as in its present value. It must be added to; it must put out new branches; it ceases to grow only at the cost of wholly ceasing to be. If you take a ramble over the Calton Hill, toward the east of Edinburgh, you will see a group of pillars standing there in a strangely inchoate condition. They are the fragment of a great architectural piece, begun but never finished, because the springs of public generosity dried up when the work was half-done. They had their beauty in virtue of that which was to follow; now that nothing has followed, however, their beauty has grown somewhat dim and faint. So faith, when viewed as a promise of the future, and glowing with early fire, is a thing of joy and inspiration; no onlooker can behold it without a hope and prayer for the best that is yet to be. But faith as a mere memory; faith as a never-completed fragment; faith as a heap of ashes, cold and grey on the hearthstone of life—is there a sadder sight in all the world?

Now is this not a truth forgotten by a large proportion of the people in our churches? They get so little out of their faith. It yields so slight a harvest, either in Christian character or Christian living. They overlook the fact that faith is like the title-deeds to an estate, perfectly valid, yet quite profitless till they are put in force. When the trust by which

they have grasped God ought to be in them like a glowing white fire, hot enough to consume all the dross and impurities in their nature, the bystander is often at a loss to say whether it is still burning. How often belief in Jesus Christ—the richest talent ever bestowed on man, and the interest on which, in power and beauty and usefulness of life, ought to have grown past all knowledge—how often it is wrapped up in the napkin of feeble indolence, and huddled fruitlessly out of sight and care!

Nay, says my text, in your faith supply, or furnish, virtue. Now the Greek word translated "supply" is a very full and suggestive one. It is a word with a history. It takes us back to the days in old Athens when it was reckoned a high honour by a citizen to be asked to defray the expenses of a public ceremony. Translate that idea into the language of religion, and bring it down to date, and it means, does it not, that God is willing to launch us into the Divine life, and to sustain us in it, but we must help to meet the cost? For of course the Christian life cannot be lived without expenditure; expenditure of a moral and spiritual kind, which goes on all the time. Are you willing to take a share in that? God gives us Christ, and all the grace enclosed in that dear name; He gives us the Cross; He gives the open grave of Easter morning; will you undertake to supply virtue, knowledge, patience? Surely religion is to cost us

something. Not simply in money, real as its claim on money is; but in effort, in prayer, in vigilance, in renunciation. These stand for the expenses of the Christian discipleship, and every follower of the Son of God must meet them. True, in order to afford them we may have to pinch ourselves somewhere else. Far too often religion is thought of as a realm in which the rules of common-sense may be flouted with impunity; but here also people who try find that impossible. If we waste our love and enthusiasm on lower things, how little is there left for God and Christ!

This part of the cost, then, is to be supplied by us; note the further suggestion in the text that the supply must be continuous. One large contribution at the outset, followed by close-fisted parsimony ever after, is not the true way. If a man subscribes heavily to a political association at first, and gives the merest pittance later, it is quite fair to argue about him—other things being equal—either that his interest in politics has waned, or that his original desire was the mere distinction of having his name on the roll of membership. And I fear that is what some of us do with Jesus Christ. Once upon a time we gave Him a great slice of our trust and love, but we have given Him very little since. God had touched our soul, our conscience was quick, our heart was tender, we were keen to serve our Lord. Where is that old

keenness now? Is our faith losing power merely because we have not put it to work? Have we failed to *add* to our faith? Let us give it free play by bringing it each day into living touch with its great object, and then of itself it will add to itself. Faith must have companions; leave it in barren solitude and it vanishes away.

Note, lastly, *what we are bidden to supply—virtue.* Plainly the word "virtue" cannot bear in this passage its widest and most general meaning. That is to say, it cannot stand for the whole class, the entire round, of moral and spiritual excellences. Otherwise, if its scope were really so wide as this, it would be superfluous to say further on, "to your knowledge add temperance, and to your temperance, patience"; for these qualities would have been already implied. When we look at the word more closely, therefore, and recollect that "virtue" in its antique sense denoted something vigorous, manly, strong, we may bring it to a point by naming it *moral courage.* To your faith add moral courage—that is the real message of our text.

It is extremely natural that this should be the grace that comes first in the series. Remember when this letter was written. It was written in an age when Christians were regarded as the off-scourings of the world. The sword of persecution hung above them suspended by a hair which the faintest

breeze of suspicion was too often enough to sever. Under these conditions moral courage was the first necessity—that unflinching iron conviction which was ready to avow faith in a crucified Jew, opposition and danger notwithstanding. Without moral courage, the Christian Church would have disappeared in half a century, like a river lost in the sands of the Sahara.

Well, the outside of life may now be different, but is the situation really altered? Is moral courage in Christians not a desideratum at this very hour? The sad fact is—as any traveller knows—that Christians are the only people in the world who get ashamed of their religion. A Mohammedan, when the hour of prayer strikes, will spread his rag of carpet in the street and break off a business interview to perform his due devotions; he does not mind what people say. In this there may be a little ostentation; I have heard the charge made; but anyhow there is real fearlessness, which is what you and I too often are wanting in. It is not enough to believe in Jesus Christ, and hide the fact as if it were disgraceful; it is not enough to steal salvation, and never tell it. At the very outset Jesus perceived the dangers of secret religion, and the reader of the Gospels knows that some of the sternest and most inexorable words He ever spoke were concerned with the absolute obligation to confess His name before men. Once when speaking of

the presence of the Spirit, He likened it to the blowing of the wind—a significant comparison, surely, for no one can be in any doubt as to whether the wind is, or is not, blowing. So faith in a man's soul ought to disclose itself unmistakably.

It is worth saying, however, that moral courage in a Christian is not the same thing, necessarily, as talking about religion. It is rather standing for the right in Christ's name. That may involve speech, or it may not. For the most part we show our sympathy more by our deeds than by our words; and, if anything in this department is quite certain, it is that unless our words and our deeds tally, the words had better far be left unspoken. Yet we sometimes have to speak. For example, the tone of conversation, all will agree, is now much higher than it used to be. And yet there are people always ready to debase it, if the chance should offer. So I put it to the men I see before me, whether they have never sat in a smoking-room, or a railway-carriage, feeling that they had been traitors to their faith, because they kept silence and listened and laughed with the rest, when it was their duty to speak out against blasphemy or unseemliness, whatever the result. I am not pleading for indiscriminate religious conversation; did not Jesus say that there was such a thing as casting pearls before swine? But while there is a time to be silent, there is also a time to speak, and to

remember that Christ is Lord also of language. If our faith in Him is what it may be, it will give wisdom as well as courage here.

So with other departments of life. A keen observer of the world once said to me that he believed the modern equivalent of persecution to be the temptation of dishonesty in business; and you who are acquainted with the commercial life will be able to check that statement. Well, let us recollect that men of the world expect a Christian to be free from little tricks of gain, and all crooked ways of dealing, however they themselves affect to make light of them. Above all, do not be intimidated by the charge that you are setting up to be better than your neighbours. Of all the poor, foolish things evil men say, that, I think, is the poorest and most foolish. Was Jesus Christ not better than His neighbours? Were the Apostles not? And, in the name of all that is sacred, what did the Master intend by calling His disciples "the salt of the earth," unless they were to be so much better than their neighbours as that the world should be kept sweet and pure by their presence? The lighthouse, be sure, is meant to be vastly brighter than the surrounding darkness; ah! yes, and that is why the storm-beaten mariner hails its far-off friendly beam, and feels the happier and safer for its message.

So brethren, be very certain that our faith gains a

power and decision from being proclaimed openly, which otherwise it cannot have. And if you feel,—as who does not?—that you dare not follow the Lord wherever He may lead, then remember whom you have beside you in the battle, and that His love and His power are all your own. His presence will calm the billows and allay the fear.

Well roars the storm to those who hear
A deeper Voice across the storm.

XVIII

SIMON THE CYRENIAN

And as they led Him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus.—Luke xxiii. 26.

Two incidents only have been recorded of the march by the Via Dolorosa, and of these this is the first. The Cross of Jesus, all the world knows, was fixed on Golgotha, a small hill near the city, and immediately beyond its gates. As the procession now passed thither, and paused at the ascent, it became obvious that something must be done to relieve the Sufferer. The accumulated effect of agitation, distress, and the horrible cruelty of scourging had so exhausted Him that for the moment He sank under the load of the coarse wooden framework on which soon He was to hang. The Roman guard, probably more impatient at the delay than pitying His feebleness, took a short way to meet the difficulty. Themselves scorning the cross far too profoundly to give the least help, they had no scruples about others' feelings. Accordingly, they hastily impressed a passer-by,

named Simon, and "on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus".

Who was this unwilling cross-bearer? Putting information and conjecture together, we may call him a foreign Jew from North Africa, who was present in Jerusalem for the passover. An Oriental's nationality can be usually told by his costume, and nothing is more probable than that the soldiery, recognising him as a stranger, picked him out for that very reason, as a man with few friends in the city, who would find it useless to complain. More than this we cannot say.

Look now at the episode as focussing one or two plain lessons in religion, which are worth pondering.

First, note *the element of surprise in life.* As Simon came in from the country, how far he was from dreaming that at the next turn of the road, just outside the Damascus Gate, life's great crisis awaited him! So much may happen in an hour. At sunrise, an obscure stranger, a single unnoticed unit amid the myriad gathering pilgrims; at sunset, immortalised by service rendered to the Saviour of the world!

It is the essential characteristic of human knowledge that an impenetrable veil hangs between us and the next five minutes. If ability to predict the future is the severest test of science, alike to simple

and learned the very next phase of the movement of things is totally inscrutable; and perhaps, amid the resounding paeans in which modern progress is celebrated, it does us all good to reflect on the elementary and humbling truth, that we know not what an hour may bring forth. I am not now concerned with the meaning of this fact, but only with the fact itself. It may be God puts His hand over our eyes because we could not bear to know the future—not the sorrow, which might unman us; not the joy, which might render a darkened present unendurable. But whatever the truth on that point, at least the only present certainty is the total uncertainty of the future. Life gets its peculiar colour largely from the unexpected.

Is it not so, ofttimes, with our sorrows? They arrive suddenly, sparing us the agony of watching their slow approach from far away; and in that we can see God's mercy. But now and then their suddenness is the worst of all. The day begins as usual. Nothing happens to warn us. Then swiftly disaster falls like an avalanche, and changes all the world. Out of the cloudless blue descends a bolt that lays life in ruins. A telegram, a visit, a chance discovery—any little thing—may be the occasion of the change; all we know is that its coming has curiously and sadly altered the outlook, and that the days when we were happy now seem strangely re-

mote. So it was with David—one day the honoured soldier-king of Jerusalem, the next, a hunted fugitive among the hills, with Absalom's bloodhounds on his track. So it was with Joseph—leaving his father's house with a boy's light heart in the rose of dawn; when evening fell, flung bruised and crushed into the pit, a chattel for the Midian merchantmen. Our smiles and tears may have their fountains wondrously close together, for things that seem to stand far apart God's overruling may place side by side.

And is it not so, frequently, also with our joys? For it is a kind of atheism which refers our griefs to God, but refuses to credit Him with our gladness. If the storm at times flings dark clouds athwart the brightness, yet how often has the rainbow suddenly appeared in the cloud, and the birds made wood and lawn merry with their voices! Or again, men toil long to reach a greatly-desired goal, straining on from month to month till the heart is sick; and on the morning of some night when they lay down fearing the struggle would never end, they wake, and God puts the prize into their hand. Or once more, utterly without thought or purpose on our part, one day, in what appears a chance encounter, we form a new acquaintance; and that meeting, by accident as we say, is the commencement of a friendship for whose love and happiness we bless God

ever after. Surely the gloomiest path and dreariest experience, if surveyed in faith, will reveal these inbreakings of unexpected joy, moving us to say, Here, and here, and here yet again, a score of times, God met me, unlooked for, as I went, bearing peace and blessedness in His hand.

Can we detect a meaning in these unanticipated elements of life? Wherein consists the ministry of surprise? In this at least, surely, that through these unlooked-for experiences we are being trained in habitual recollection of the world's transiency. All things round us are shifting like the Solway sands. The possessions we grasp so eagerly slip from our fingers all the time. They were mine yesterday; they are yours to-day; they will be some one else's to-morrow. So these swiftly-alternating episodes of joy and sorrow—chasing each other like fitful shadows on a hillside—are God's reminders that our rest is not here, and that it is folly to fling one's love away on the world. Cultivate the spirit of detachment, they tell us; live as one who must presently pass on; hold even innocent possessions with a loose hand. Do not be misled even by the fact that change makes life so interesting, into reckoning this visible scene as either supremely precious or enduring. For no surprise, be it grave or glad, can visit the thoughtful mind without stirring an implied sense of violent contrast between passing objects

which *can* be thus changed, and the things of the kingdom that cannot be shaken. If our environment thus shifts like a kaleidoscope, all the deeper reason why we should seek to have our heart fixed on the great eternal source of all stability, Who is substance, while all else is fleeting shadow. If we are one with Him, then we share His unchangingness deep down in that "basis of the soul" which does not alter, and which through union with the Eternal comes to be independent of the fears, wishes, and desires we outgrow and leave behind. We discover then that life's changes have their comforts in the Divine love; and that nothing can be too sudden for him who has mastered the lesson of the old German proverb that all things go out at last except God's will.

Note, secondly, how *felt shame may come to be our glory*. At the moment, it is probable, Simon was filled with an indignant sense of bitter wrong. There is nothing wonderful in that. A foul dishonour had been cast upon him publicly, the cross being the notorious emblem of shame; and it was a stain that nothing could wipe out. Nevertheless, there are excellent reasons for believing that shortly afterwards Simon was a Christian believer. St. Mark speaks of him familiarly as the father of Alexander and Rufus; from which it is a natural deduction that the entire household had embraced the new faith. In

that case his conversion was due to the circumstance of his being pressed suddenly into this hateful service; and how different must his later view have been of that lamentable experience! Doubtless, as has been said, it became the romance of his life. He discharged a menial and despised office; but in exchange he got a place in the record of the Passion; and so long as the gospel is preached—if we may adapt Jesus' prophecy in another place—this that Simon did will be told for a memorial of him.

In the light of retrospect, then, dishonour came to be viewed as a blessing and a distinction; and is not that what always happens with true cross-bearing? Whatever pain or sacrifice you submit to, because you are a helper of the Christian cause, and refuse to conceal your colours; whatever reproach and scorn you incur for principle's sake, in opposition to worldly opinion, will certainly not be pleasant at the time. If it were, it would be no cross. There may be real, poignant suffering and discomfort; of such a kind that you are tempted to protest bitterly against the severity of it. But that will not be your feeling always. Instead, a day will come when you remember it with pride and a devout thankfulness that, just then, God enabled you to bear the cross for His name. Many another experience, indeed, recalled penitently in the parting hour of death,

you would gladly strike out of record if only you could replace them by the recollection of a nobler devotion and a sweeter self-denial. What stand out then as life's great moments will be the crosses of the past, well deserving to be multiplied a hundredfold.

This holds good, also, of many troubles which we do not so naturally describe as "crosses". In regard to every burden, deprivation, or grief, the pain of which is moderated and sustained by faith in God, our interpretation of its meaning is very likely to be in after days the exact reverse of our interpretation now. Life alters its complexion in proportion to the mental angle from which we view it, strangely reminding us of the poet's wise couplet that

> There's nothing either good or bad,
> But thinking makes it so.

Listen to Jacob in Pharaoh's presence, summing up his past career: "Sad and evil have the days of the years of my life been"; and listen to the same man, striking a very different chord not long after: "God, that blessed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel that redeemed me from all evil". What explains the pessimism of the one view, and the optimism of the other? Just the absence or the presence of the thought of God. Left out, it makes darkness; brought in, and made supreme, it diffuses

genial day. Look away over the lake as the sun is going down, and in one direction nothing is visible but dusky shadows, for you are gazing on the wave's dark side. But turn, and in the other direction the light will appear flashing back like diamonds from every curling crest. So is it with life. What we see as its predominating pattern depends on what we prepare for and expect to see. We may look on the bright or the dark side of the wave.

But remember it is faith in Christ that makes the vital difference. That is the true philosopher's stone, turning all the baser metals to gold, and transmuting very lowly experiences almost beyond recognition. It is at the foot of the cross that men learn God's mystic art of interpretation, by which a soul of goodness is educed from things evil, and blessings wrung out of what appeared to be fraught only with dismalest ruin. If this irritating accident stung the Cyrenian into tears of rage, yet ere long the bitter cross-bearing altered its look wondrously, and one day he found himself, like the apostles, able to rejoice that it was given to him also not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for His sake. That secret we too may practise. Man has yet to discover the pain which Christ's love will not transfigure. Speak but His dear name over the worst humiliation, and it will shed round it an unfading cloud of beauty.

There is one practical maxim yielded by these accumulated considerations, which is that you and I are wise to judge nothing before the time. It is better, which means more believing, to pause and think again before passing sentence on a dark experience. If I do not see it to be good, let me not at least call it evil. After all, the question is not how the pain feels at present, but how I shall estimate the whole in memory one day. Jewels are not to be cast away because of a tarnished and befouled setting. It is the axiom of Christian faith—verified in the lot of all those who have hoped in God—that joy and gain are concealed somewhere in the least promising events, if only we have patience to let them appear, or will search for them as for hid treasure. In the poorest instrument there sleeps exquisite music, waiting for the master hand; and of all man's painful discipline there is no single aspect that will not display its priceless hidden riches at the magic touch of brave faith.

Note, lastly, how we have suggested here *the vicarious atonement of Christ.* For when we look more closely, what is the real fact that takes shape? We see a sinful man—one of ourselves—bearing the cross to Calvary, yet, when arrived there, once more yielding it up to Christ. So far, but only so far, he can bear that crushing load; but when the place of death is reached, where man's sin and God's judg-

ment meet and merge together, the human instrument becomes inadequate; he must resign it to Another, and step back into the posture of a spectator only. And I feel that in this detail, as in so many minute points in the Passion-narrative, a suggestion is given of larger truths than appear at first. It seems to tell us, as if in parable, that the cross did not belong to Jesus by right; for in truth it did not belong to Him at all, it became His by choice. The cross was ours; a burden of pain, a righteous badge of shame and guilt allotted as our fit portion; a penalty that in our clearest hours we know was due for each one of us; in a word, it was the cross of man. And in Simon we see none other than man's symbolic representative, by his presence and his service unconsciously declaring that there Jesus took on Himself a chastisement not His own. In that hour we were healed by His stripes.

My brother, you and I are typified in the Cyrenian. In visible act he did what we must do in thought and feeling, if salvation is to be ours, and the infinite virtue of that death to avail for us. We too must take up the cross, and in person deliver it up to Jesus Christ, in the sense that by trust and penitent sympathetic imagination we realise that it belongs to, and befits, every sinner, that it stands for the punishment we deserve, and that we should have been

abandoned to endure it, had not that great love intervened. Thank God that Jesus took the cross from Simon on Calvary! Thank God that He put aside His unwilling henchman and claimed to suffer alone, as the only Redeemer of the world! Have you asked Him to do that for you? Have you put yourself in Simon's place, and awakened to what had else been sin's penalty and ruin, and so hastened to Christ for refuge with the cry, This is the cross I could not bear; bear Thou it, my Saviour, in my room? That is faith. That is repentance. That is salvation and life and blessedness. To discern and acknowledge in mind and heart and conscience that my guilt deserves the cross, and yet to yield it up in unspeakable gratitude to Jesus Christ, believing that He is strong to endure it for me—such is the open secret of redemption for you and me and every man.

Then besides that, another and equally real sense holds good in which we are summoned to perpetuate Simon's act. Not merely is the cross the gateway of the Christian life; it is its signature and distinctive mark ever after. Vicarious atonement by no means implies that we never have anything to bear. Many people think it does, thereby bringing grave discredit on the Gospel; but it is a mistake born of simple ignorance, for no one can help

noticing, and feeling the significance of, the fact that in the New Testament practically all the allusions to Jesus as our Pattern are given in direct connection with His passion. *Because* He suffered, therefore we suffer with Him. So, again, St. Paul speaks of fellowship in the Lord's sufferings as that after which he more and more aspired; and in this mixed world there will be no need to manufacture occasions of endurance; they will meet us in plenty, provided only we do not shrink from them. In each life meriting the Christian name self-denial, sacrifice, loss, humiliation will be found that would have been impatiently, or even indignantly, thrust aside had Christ not chosen them, but which are made welcome, even if it be falteringly, for His sake.

Do we understand what these things mean? Have we learnt that they are no accident in the devout life, but its essence? Is it even now dawning on us that there is a price to pay for fellowship with Christ? Well, if we are wakening to these vast, but sometimes forgotten, truths, and if at times the price seems very costly, let us not fail to recollect what it means for Christ that we should pay it. Simon of Cyrene bore the cross, and thus spared the Lord some pain; let us bear ours as He appoints it, in the world, and in the redeeming toil of His Kingdom; and that too will spare Him pain—the pain of seeing others lost whom we

might have helped to save, the pain of beholding our so fruitless and barren lives. Nay rather, it will fill the cup of joy that was set before Him when He Himself endured the bitter cross, "despising the shame".

I think of the Cyrenian
Who crossed the city-gate
When forth the stream was pouring
That bore Thy cruel fate.

. . . . . .

I ponder what within him
The thoughts that woke that day,
As his unchosen burden
He bore that unsought way.

. . . . . .

Yet, tempted he as we are;
O Lord, was Thy cross mine?
Am I, like Simon, bearing
A burden that is Thine?

Thou must have looked on Simon;
Turn, Lord, and look on me,
Till I shall see and follow
And bear Thy cross for Thee.

XIX

A PROVIDENCE OR A TEMPTATION?

I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed. 1 Sam. xxiv. 10.

THE touching and picturesque incident here related is an extract from the life of an outlaw. It took place amid the wild deep ravines that overhang the oasis of Engedi. This spot, situate about half way down the western shore of the Dead Sea, owes its name, as it does its luxuriant growth of vegetation, to a fountain which rises from the limestone rock and falls in long silver ribbands to the sloping plain below. There were many reasons why David should take refuge here. The deep gorges and bleak hills were safe. Wood and water abounded. The solitude had its own charm. But no long time elapsed till the solitude was broken rudely by the warlike invasion of King Saul. With a fierce band of troops he had hurried out to seize the fugitive alive or dead, for just then there burned in him a fever heat of malignant envy. Too often the prey had escaped his grasp, but this time he would make sure. This time the expedition must

finish its work. It was a skilful plan, likely enough to be successful, if man were the only partner in the transaction. But God cannot safely be forgotten in our schemings; and although He may not always melt the heart of men like Saul, He finds many ways of tying their hands. So this chapter has lessons worth pondering by all who move amid the changing passions of human life.

Note, first, *the greatness of David's temptation.* Quite simply the incident came about. David and his men lay hiding at the back of one of the caves so frequent in those rugged defiles; and into this very cave who should come in the very heat of midday but Saul himself? The place was as dark as midnight to one entering from the intense glare of the sunshine, whereas those already within, their eyes accustomed to the gloom, could observe with perfect distinctness the movements of the new-comer. So the fugitives, crouching along the vast cavern sides, watched the king as he entered and lay down, and marked with satisfaction that he was alone. Then we have a hurried colloquy among the little band. At last by the merest chance revenge had been put in their reach, and eager voices whispered that not a moment should be lost in grasping it. To let Saul escape would be madness and impiety; what had happened was as good as a command to rise and strike home. Deal him the fatal blow here and now. Creep up

behind him where he lies unconscious, and smite him to the heart.

It was a temptation all but overwhelming. Particularly for an Eastern mind, it did look extremely like a divinely-given opportunity. David had a long list of grievances to settle, and one thrust of a dirk would pay them all. Besides, he must enrage his followers by refusing. To them his hesitation was totally unintelligible, and as he wavered their words became crueller and more insistent. Is it not a situation that arrives, some time or other, in nearly every human life? Vast advantages are offered to us, at this point or that, for what seems a very small price. Some position, some distinction to which we think we have a right lies merely waiting to be seized; some success which appears to be only the continuation, the natural sequel of the success God has given us in the past; and it is ours for the taking. Only write that letter; only speak that word; only, at the right moment, refrain from speaking, and keep silence prudently, and the prize is yours. One step, and you have distanced all your rivals. Has not a higher influence guided you to this turning-point in your life, intentionally sweeping every obstacle out of the path, that nothing might hinder or embarrass your decision? And remember, by acting with promptitude, you will please your friends; you will gratify men whom experience has shown to have your real

interest at heart. You can scarcely afford to neglect their wishes. If you do, they may cease to be your friends. Have we not all felt the allurement; have we not had to meet those reasonings? Has it not seemed at times as if both the promises of God and His providence were combining to force our hand and justify the act?

Notwithstanding, to all their arguments David had but one reply. Never would he put forth his hand against the anointed of the Lord, and with a peremptory word to that effect he silences the tongues of hate and cunning. Then it occurs to him as an afterthought that it were well to secure some proof by which to convince the king later that his life had been in his grasp; and, yielding to this second impulse, he moved quietly down near to the entrance of the cave, and shore away the fringe of Saul's long robe. Ah! the pity of it when men soil the grace of a noble temper by a touch of meanness in the deed. To give money generously, but with an air of irritating patronage; to yield place to a rival, but with a growl of jealous resentment; to stain the proffered lily with a smirch of dust—it is a human foible all too common, and David, even in one of his noblest hours, fell victim to the weakness. It was little he had done, truly; nothing in contrast to that which he might have done; yet as he crept back to his hiding-place the thought that he had

been guilty of a rude practical jest, as puerile as it was unworthy, struck him with remorse. After all, this man was a God-chosen king, honourable in office if not in character, and that office should have kept him safe from insult. And so, as if the quick rush of compunction had only stiffened his resolve, he answers the sullen expostulations of his men in a tone of finality: "God forbid that I should put forth my hand against him".

There is something in such an attitude not unworthy to be called great and high. This man is no mere hero; he has in him the materials of which saints are made. And what is the principle that rules his action, curbing both the savage purposes of those around him and the hot fever racing in his own veins? What but this, that men must not go faster to their goal than the will of God permits? Do not take short cuts to happiness, if to do it you have to leave the high-road of rectitude and mercy. It was a promise of God to David that one day he should wear the crown, but he would not step up to it over Saul's dead body. He would not be king before God's time at such a price as that! How often men ruin their lives by, as we say, "playing Providence" to their own career; by arguing, that is, that the wheels of the Divine purpose are revolving too slowly, and that this justifies them in helping on the process a little faster by some doubtful act which promises immediate

fruit. And yet the plan always fails. It failed with Rebekah, the mother of Jacob; for the poor deception she taught her son sent him round a long, long way, instead of straight to his goal: it loaded him with shame; it lost her the consolation of his presence all her after life. It is bad policy to do evil that good may come; but it is bad policy because it is wrong. Better lose our kingdom than come to it, like Macbeth, with stained hands.

This is a lesson which ought to be engraved, as with a pen of iron, in the minds and hearts of the ambitious. Most ambitions are right and praiseworthy in themselves; it is the choice of means by which to seek their accomplishment that really tries our mettle. Now and then one brief moment's deviation from righteousness offers us the whole; as if already our fingers were closing round the prize. Was it not the very temptation that faced our Lord? "All these things—the kingdoms of the world—will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me". Jesus Christ longed for dominion—God had pledged His word that He should have it; here it is, like ripe fruit, needing but a touch to drop into His hand, without pain or agony or cross. All this for one moment's bowing of the knee! But there rang out the words of holy anger: "Get thee behind Me, Satan," and at once all the magic spells were broken, and the devil departed from Him. Let us find in

David's example, still more in that of great David's greater Son, the principle of righteous action. Opportunity is not permission. What looks like Providence may be a snare of the devil. So beware of that policy on which you can embark only by soiling your clear sense of right. Beware of side-paths that lead through the mire. Stick to the highway of the King, and leave the future issues in His keeping. Wave back the eager or contemptuous arguments of others, when they plead for your real worldly interest, or cry that you are a fool to be so scrupulous; and say with brave Nehemiah, and in his reliance on a higher will: "So did *not* I, because of the fear of God".

But more. The prize *seems* to be ours, ours for a trifling cost; but it is only seeming. What men long for is a happiness that lasts; they long for objects only as a means to that. And when they clutch at the desired thing, with a haste that consents to doubtful moral compromises, it is to find that the dreamt-of happiness has vanished in their grasp. It is like the lamps of alabaster in ancient lore, of which we read that if the outer globe were shattered, the inner light at once expired. So the heritage of success and joy God is keeping for you and me has been enclosed in a protecting sheath of right action and peace of conscience—break, violate that, and the soul of happiness is gone. Had David listened to his men,

and sunk his dagger in Saul's breast, the royal mantle might have been his the sooner; but remorse would have dogged him to his latest day. Where would then have been his friendship with high-souled Jonathan, where the pride and love of his followers, where the music of his psalms? And every man, with a spark of nobleness in his being, who takes the short path of sin to his goal, is poisoning the very springs of satisfaction, and robbing achievement of its sweetest charm. Let hopes and dreams all perish and die, rather than that we should lay up bitter regrets, guilty burdens, memories of wrong that never can be blotted out. Keep your life, I pray you, at least without shadows such as these. Wait for God's time. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass.

Secondly, note *David's fearless expostulation.* In the cavern scene he had shown a self-control both magnanimous and reverent; but the spirit of his after conduct is just as noble. For no sooner had the king rejoined his men than a shout was heard behind them, and David appeared, trophy in hand, risking capture in the eager longing to protest his innocence and plead for reconciliation. It was a courageous act, proving once more that in the pursuit of a worthy aim the bold course is ever the wisest, for not a man stirred to lay a finger on the intrepid speaker. And then comes his kindly argument for

peace, clothed in terms of candour, of affection, real though wounded to the quick, of solemn and masculine appeal to the God who vindicates the right. "He has no words of reproach," some one has written, "no weak upbraidings, no sullen anger, no repaying hate with hate". Just that one sentence of protest at the outset, to clear the air: "Wherefore hearkenest thou to men's words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt?"

Now, for one moment consider the position of this one man, face to face with a whole army. Immediately before David had spared the king's life, against his own interest, he was told; well, the world's favourite charge when men control themselves nobly is a charge of cowardice. "You are afraid; had you dared you would have done as others do." At first it sounds like a real home-thrust; and many is the high-spirited nature that has been stung into pain and shame by the mocking innuendo. Yet it is the emptiest and poorest of all lies. Thank God, there have been and are thousands like David to prove that bravery and conscience go hand in hand. As we see in great figures like Havelock or Gordon, so far from gentleness, or an exquisite consideration for others, being somehow unrelated to personal valour, they are the nearest of blood-kindred. And when loyalty to conscience has sunk its roots deep down in Christian faith, then the secret of quenchless courage has been learnt, and the

undaunted soul has an ally to lean upon that it knows will never fail.

Then, besides its courage, note the profound wisdom of David's attitude. He has been slandered by those who gained by every blot on his good name; how does he now deal with the cruel lie? He confronts the man who had given it credit; he rebuts it manfully; but, finally, and with a solemn reiteration, he commits the verdict to Him who alone can rectify the wrong. Now, we live in a world where evil-speaking is rife, and false witness flies on myriad wings. Our character, the most precious possession of these mortal years, is at the mercy of a bitter tongue. Even the best men have been traduced cruelly, for if enough dirt be thrown some *may* stick, and the whiter the life is the clearer will the mud show. Let us remember that the truth is safe with God. "He shall make thy righteousness to go forth as the light." And after all, the darts of malice drop from us harmlessly if we are clad in unseen armour. When it was told Plato that he had many enemies who spoke ill of him, "It is no matter," he replied, "I shall live so that none will believe them". And this, through the love of God in Christ Jesus, you and I also may do.

Lastly, note *how to win a brother's soul.* Love can work miracles where violence avails nothing. There is an invisible secret in manly patience to

which all the forces of passion have nothing to compare. See that law at work here. "And it came to pass when David made an end of speaking . . . Saul lifted up his voice and wept." Ah! that wreck of a noble nature; how it can still recall its old greatness, and for one moment turn back the shadow on the dial and bring the morning dawn again! How Saul can be his better self once more, in chivalry and self-effacement, as with a pathetic vehemence he protests that David is a truer man than he, and foretells his sure possession of the throne, and bids him show mercy in the day of his coming power. It was the other's kindness that stirred him thus. It was the gentleness of the hunted man that called out this stray gleam of a loftier spirit, and brought him back, yet once again, to the border of repentance.

Friends, it is the best way to gain our brother, for it is the way of Christ. Love is the greatest thing in the world, and its power the mightiest. Your matter-of-fact man calls that a sentiment; but in sober truth there is nothing, anywhere, so real, so potent, so practical. Results have been accomplished by the influence of affectionate and honest good-will that all the apparatus and paraphernalia of defiance could never have produced, and that a menacing display of weapons would have made impossible for ever. It is a sense in which we may stoop to conquer, and win

most when we appear to have yielded all. In the life of John Selwyn, Bishop of Melanesia, it is related how a young savage, while under instruction in a carpentry school, turned upon the missionary one day in ungovernable passion, and struck him full in the face. For one instant Selwyn stood over him, his athletic frame—he had been in the Cambridge boat—tense with feeling, his face white and set; then at once he turned on his heel, and walked away swiftly, to calm himself in prayer. Months passed; and the young savage, who had become a Christian, was being prepared for baptism. But a beam fell from a house-roof and broke his back, and the baptismal service was hastened. They gathered in his hut, and one bent over him, as his breath became shorter and more feeble, and asked by what name he wished to be called. "Call me John Selwyn," was the answer, "for that day he showed me what a Christian might be." Yes, in the lowest and the worst there is a spot of feeling that can be touched; and love, Christian love, love lit from the flame that burned in Jesus, will touch it to everlasting issues.

So David sware unto Saul; "and Saul went home". It is possible that this was the last interview between the two men, and how pleasant it is when the last meeting is the happiest! Would not Saul carry back from Engedi a heart not only wiser but gladder, because of the ineradicable assurance that David

cared for him, and had done him nothing but good? And reading the incident so, we may surely take it as a transparent symbol of the divinest truth. Is not David's appeal the very appeal which the Father is making to us now? Each day we live God has us in His grasp. He can do with us as He will; our life, our times, our fate are in His hand. And yet what does He say?—"As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." Is even that the whole? Nay there is more, far far more: "Come now, and let us reason together," "Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee." God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. Ah! it is the means that only He could have devised; and how many there are who might have struck back at God had He struck them, who yet have broken down, and melted into tears of penitence at the sight of the Cross. Love will make way when power has failed. Has it won you? Has it taught you the better way, and changed your thoughts of God, and put a new song on your lips? God Himself grant it; for life and all its experience is lost and gone for nothing unless we have learnt to say, in the heart's secret place: "We love Him, because He first loved us".

XX

CHRIST'S RELATION TO MEN, AND OURS

And when it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals. But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart; give ye them to eat. Matt. xiv. 15, 16.

JESUS and the twelve had meant to have a quiet time together; but the unceremonious interposition of the multitude had broken up their holiday. For long they had been toiling hard. Therefore Christ saw that the men round Him had been giving out more than they took in, spending more than their income, working more than thinking or praying. The strain was becoming too sore. Then, in loving vigilance, He carried them off to be alone with Him on the other side of the lake.

Very soon, however, the crowd broke in again without mercy for their weariness. It was a larger crowd than usual, the pilgrim caravans being on their way to Jerusalem for the passover. You know how vexing it is to have your privacy invaded, and your rest spoiled: the only excuse for that, you feel,

is the pressure of real emergency. But, so far as the disciples could perceive, nothing in the least like an emergency existed now. Not danger or need, they said, but simple curiosity has drawn these people here; they might just as well have put off their coming some days longer. How natural the feeling was; we should all have felt much the same. Only—and this is the first point that strikes me in the story—what the disciples considered an annoyance filled their Master with compassion. Crowds affected Jesus strangely; and, indeed, in the aspect of a crowd there is always something pathetic and mysterious. Nowhere does the bare simplicity of human nature show itself so frankly as in a crowd. Men gathered in a vast throng will do things they would never dream of doing separately. They will laugh more foolishly, they will shout more fiercely, they will break out suddenly into acts of fury, they will melt into a gentler and swifter penitence then than when alone. The child in the man peeps out at such a time. And the sight of their myriad up-turned faces, patient, eager, trustful, has been enough, oft-times, to bring tears to eyes not much given to weeping. So, as I have said, it was with Jesus Christ. He could not look upon them and not be stirred at the very heart. He had compassion on the multitudes, because they were as sheep without a shepherd.

Let me speak to you this evening, not of the whole

episode of this miracle, but of the preliminary scene narrated in the text. It is a prelude to the larger incident, enacted quietly between the twelve and the Master. I think we may find that it suggests some ideas, none the worse for being simple, about Christ's relationship, and ours, to the human need. Two or three such lessons stand out from the rest.

First, note *the petition of the twelve.* "Send the multitude away, that they . . . may buy themselves victuals." On the face of it, nothing could have been more reasonable. It grew late, and the Eastern twilight was quickly fading; no provisions were at hand; there were women and children in the crowd: what more natural than the advice now volunteered, that the congregation should be dismissed at once? The words have a kindly, prudent look, as you read them; a looker-on would have called the plan a most wise precaution. That is our first impression. But we recollect that some forms of kindness may be less kind than they seem. These people offer the best counsel within their reach, no doubt, and all their proposals are made in quite good faith. Yet the truth is they do not understand the case with which they have to deal. Their line is too short to fathom the depth of need.

Brethren, is not the petition of the Twelve a fair sample of human prescriptions for the ills that flesh is heir to? Is it not an average specimen of the best

that men, apart from the love of God in Christ, can do for each other? Remember, this is the first time the voice of the twelve had been heard that day. Hitherto it had been the voice of Jesus, quiet, gracious, regal, as He moved through the press, to teach and heal. Now at last His companions break silence—to say only this, Send the multitude away; let them buy themselves bread. Why, the disciples are very like many of ourselves, are they not? It is quite a common thing for men to be given sensible advice, when in fact they need a gospel of redeeming grace. Over and over again prudential counsels have displaced the glad tidings of the Cross. Christianity is made so sagaciously commonplace that no one thinks it worth while to believe it. Well, but "send them away," with all its undeniable sagacity, is hardly the motto one would choose for a world-conquering faith. Besides, the multitude had not asked to be sent away. They were only too glad to stay near Christ, and it was Christ's wish they should stay. And as we read the narrative, how it grows on us as sad and strange that of all people the Twelve should have stepped in thus to part the needy from Him they needed so, the sick from the great Physician!

Has the Church in later ages, or even in our own day, ever repeated their unthinking cruelty? Have those whose joy it should have been to bring Christ and men face to face ever intervened between the

gifts of Jesus Christ and the hungry-hearted empty-handed sinner? Do you recall how when John Wesley began to go up and down the country as a national evangelist, the clergymen of England, and some in Scotland, barred the doors of their churches in his face. "The people crowd so," they complained, "that they block up the church, and leave no room for the best of the parish." It is the easiest thing in the world, and the fatalest, to become too respectable. And the beginning of the end has come for any Church that would rather see its buildings empty than filled with men and women whose only disqualification is their ignorance or poverty or sin.

One thing, however, the twelve had done perfectly; they had grasped the difficulties of the situation. It was a faultless diagnosis. "The place is desert," they said, and the statement was obviously true. "The time is already past," they added, as they glanced to where the sun was westering, and again the fact was undeniable. They were right every time. No difficulty has ever been felt in perceiving that something is wrong with this world. One set of experts declare that man's lower nature has enslaved the higher; another that he is inherently selfish; another that he loves the world too much. They are all pointing to the same disease, though each has fixed on a different symptom. Sensuality, selfishness, worldliness—what are they but just three separate aspects of *sin*; and

long before Christ men had detected sin, and even painted its blackness and ruin in colours that have not faded yet. Human nature is strangely quick to perceive its own need, and even to describe with great accuracy and fulness its own inability to give that need satisfaction. Where it fails is in devising a remedy.

And the disciples' prescription? What this was we have just noted: Send them away; let them buy themselves food. They could see the difficulty and pass it on, but they could not solve it. Have you ever yielded to this tendency to act as if a thing ceased to be real once it had been put out of sight? Men still living can remember a day when the mother country used to ship all her criminals to the colonies; it was the simplest way to dispose of an objectionable part of the population, and once past Gibraltar they could be forgotten. The criminals were just as real as ever; just as much in need of help and of brotherhood; but they were now less obtrusive. Don't we still take that plan sometimes? Don't people take it when they dream of the removal of sin by higher education and political reform and elevated recreations? Why, it is only the prescription of the disciples over again—the delusion that you have cancelled a debt when you pass it on, place it under a new heading, use a different schedule. It is only turning over to another human

agency a problem so awful, so stupendous, that it needs God himself, at Gethsemane and on Calvary, to resolve it. Men and women, do not let us pay ourselves with words, or suppose that we have conjured away sin when we have talked about things like heredity and environment and social conditions. After you have got better houses for the people—and sorely they are needed often—you have to begin all over again and get better people for the houses. Sin is in man himself, not in his surroundings.

But the words of the Twelve suggest this other thought, that when men do awaken to the world's need, they so often fall into despair over it. The case is hopeless, they say; take it somewhere else, for we can do nothing. Sin and evil are so engrained in these outcasts, with their drink and lust, that you will never wash them clean again. Ah! and it is just then that the Christian gospel, which had protested all the time against specious phrases being used to cover up the mischief, steps in among pessimistic philosophies and cynicism and helpless panic-stricken worldliness, and in Christ's name says, Bring them hither to me. And then by a mighty act of His great love it removes burdens, and cuts away malignant growths, and men stand up healed, strong, courageous, rejoicing in God their Saviour. To touch hearts and change lives is the prerogative of Jesus.

Note, secondly, *the strange unconsciousness of Jesus'*

power. It does not seem to have occurred to these men that the simplest course was to appeal to the Lord. They had debated various plans, but not this one. They came to Jesus, indeed; only it was not to ask Him to solve the difficulty, but to point out that it was insoluble. So when He said, "They need not depart," the disciples could scarce believe their ears. There was surely some misconception; He could not mean just what He said.

Now, I would ask you to recollect that they had seen Jesus do mighty works before this. They had been present when He cured the sick of the palsy and gave the blind men back their sight. And slow work as it may have been, they had begun to appreciate the wonderful grace that dwelt in Him, and gave Him a place apart. Yet all that might have been unknown, so far as their present quandary was concerned. Had they been strangers to Jesus Christ, they could hardly have shown less confidence in His ability to help them.

Well, and is not that very like you and me and every one of us? Do we not catch ourselves in the same blunder as they made? You have lived long, it may be, in fellowship with Christ; yet do you never find yourself brooding over life's perplexities, and lamenting its trials, as gloomily as if you had never heard His name? Have you ever come to the dismal conclusion that your hindrances are greater

than your helps, simply because you have omitted to take the love of God into your reckoning? And do you feel as if that were either wise or worthy in a believing man? Why, it is exactly as if you were to say, I am so faint that I cannot think of tasting bread, so thirsty that it is useless to stoop down and drink. Oh, brethren, it is a fault we are all inclined to,—this habit of forgetting, this way of ignoring the glorious truth that in Jesus Christ there is more to make us glad than there can be anywhere else to make us sorry. Do not let us have so retentive a memory for our sufferings and our losses, and one so poor for all that He has done to help us. Do not let our imagination picture so clearly the dangers that lie ahead, while leaving out the one pledge of security that really matters. "The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters." To put our difficulties under the magnifying-glass, and turn our blind eye upon the promises—that is the unfailing secret of cowardice and depression. It is when Christ fills the eye, and His hand grasps ours, in Divine guidance and consolation, that the heart expands with hope, and obstacles dwindle and vanish as we approach them.

On such conditions, like these apostles we shall find that Jesus Christ is equal to all emergencies. Need only draws forth His grace, and proves Him the power of God unto salvation. No case is incurable,

no crisis is intractable, no instance is desperate for Him. To see this, and believe it, and shape one's life and hope by it habitually, is the only way in which we can do our great Saviour justice. All the help and stimulus and protection and sweetness that are in Him for the world, He would have us turn our hearts to, and enjoy daily.

Brethren, you and I have need perpetually to be revising our poor conceptions of the Lord Jesus Christ, and expanding them to a magnitude more worthy of His loving power. At times we feel that we have only half understood Him. We have been setting limits where there are no limits in reality, and rendering ourselves miserable about difficulties that are no difficulties to Him. Time is required to know Christ; and if we had only this life to do it in the lesson would really never be learnt. There lies the great Christian argument for immortality: just the consciousness that here we have made no more than a beginning in appreciating the majesty and grace of Jesus Christ, and that even a beginning would not have been vouchsafed unless somewhere else we were going to finish. Death cannot touch our inheritance in Him. If He has permitted us to know Him, led us and fed us all these years, redeemed us from evil, shown us providential guidance and the care of an unchanging love, what has it all been for, except that one day He may draw us closer still, and satisfy com-

pletely those desires He himself has quickened? No other creed is possible; He is keeping for another life that which He has not been able to give us here. It was a saying of Lord Kelvin that every scientific discovery starts far deeper questions than it solves; and every conception of Christ you and I form, and then have to take to pieces because we have outgrown it, gives place to one grander, more broad and deep and high. And yet while with men their increasing greatness seems only to put them farther off from those who knew them in older days, with Christ, His growing majesty brings Him all the nearer. The more He fills the universe, the more He loves to deal with single souls. And it is when we see most clearly that He is all in all, that we know most surely that He is all our own.

So, lastly, note *the commanding word of Christ.* "They need not depart; give ye them to eat". The greatness of a leader is revealed in the deeds he asks from the men behind him; the greatness of a teacher in the range of truth he carries his scholars on to grasp and know. How that principle is exemplified in Jesus a thousand times! "Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven"; "love your enemies"; "take with you neither purse nor scrip"; "give ye them to eat". At once they felt it could not be done. Provide for so many there and then; feed the population of a city?—merely to speak of

it was trifling. What did it mean, that this problem of despair, which they had assumed would be too much even for Christ, should now be thrown back upon them?

Well, it meant at least that they were not to evade responsibility. The startling words lit up the field of duty, summoning them to a task that was not their neighbours' but their own. We may not shirk the obligation of caring for our fellows. God is continually burning upon men's hearts this imperious truth that we *are* our brother's keeper, and that it is only men like Cain who say we are not. We are debtors to weak and fainting humanity. We are called on, without exception, to pay into that fund of love and help and hope from which a starving world may draw. In presence of their need God is saying to *us*, "Give ye them to eat". Are we pushing this responsibility on to the shoulders of some one else? For example, are we saying to our hearts, "Better leave the next generation to solve the drink problem." Or again, "Don't touch the housing question; too many people we know are making a high dividend out of a slum". Or yet again, "The Church has so many heathen round her doors at home, we see no need of foreign missions". Believe me, nothing worth doing has ever been done in history except by men who were prepared to say, I am the nearest to this duty; if I let it lie any longer the chances are it

will lie untouched; therefore with God's help I will put my hand to the work.

Come now to the vital issue here. These fainting multitudes needed *bread*; the very staple of existence; and that, Christian men and women, is what the world needs from us—bread, the bread of the soul, Jesus Christ who gave His flesh for the life of men. Are you giving *that* to those around you? Is there a man, woman, or child living to whom you ever spoke a word about God? When you see them trying to satisfy the inward hunger, or to build up personal character, with the sweetmeats of pleasure or the dreary chaff of worldliness, did you ever point out that there is such a thing as bread to be had, and that you know the secret of getting it? What if some of your friends or neighbours are starving at the granary door, and the key all the time in your pocket? There are people in your neighbourhood, people that work with you in office or factory or workshop, whom you meet in a hundred ways of business or acquaintance, who are linked to you by many "relations dear and all the charities of father, son, and brother"; and God has brought you near to them that you may bless them. Do you not hear the appeal of Christ? They need not depart; they need not go out, out into a cold, perilous, heartless world, seeking what will quench their cravings and

desires. Give *ye* them to eat; you that know them, you that love them.

Brethren, if Christ's commanding word stirs us to a new activity, what discovery shall we make? Just that which the Twelve made, rendering their hopeless task an easy one. The discovery, namely, that Christ is with us, in His consciousness of our circumstances, and in the activity of His influence; and that wherever true men, longing to help, bring Him their scanty resources, and ask His blessing, there the impossible becomes simple and the inconceivable is done. Food and shelter were the needs of those weary Galileans, and still, in a far more profound sense, it is the same. Wherever men go they carry with them a heart that craves love, a conscience that longs for cleansing, a reason groping bravely on to the light. These are the great pathetic uniformities. If you are Christ's you know where satisfaction for their need is found. You have trod the path; you have tasted angel's food. Put it into the hand of such as are ready to perish. Do not withhold what so many lack; do not keep silence, when a word may mean salvation. Speak out the faith by which you live. Speak it out in confidence, in love, in humility, in frank and honest good-will, and He of whom you speak will hear and send His blessing.

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